西尾維新

NISIOISIN

Illustration take

サイコロジカル

兎吊木垓輔の戯言殺し

講談社 NOVELS

~Translated by suiminchuudoku

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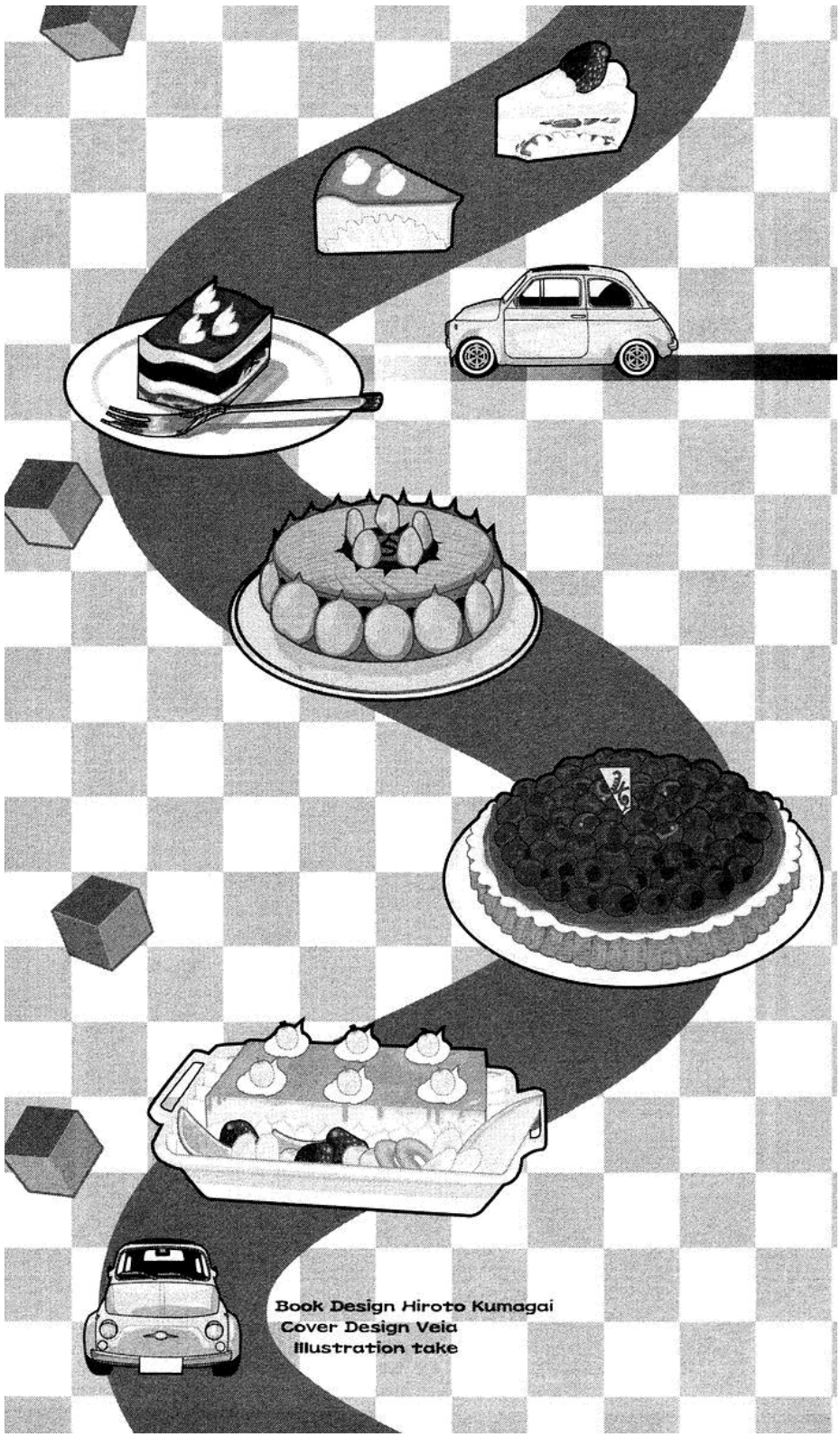

Book Design Hiroto Kumagai
Cover Design Veia
Illustration take

登場人物紹介

玖渚友（くなぎさ・とも）――≪死線の蒼≫。

鈴無音々（すずなし・ねおん）――保護者。

ぼく（語り部）――十九歳。

斜道卿壱郎（しゃどう・きょういちろう）――≪堕落三昧≫。

大垣志人（おおがき・しと）――助手。

宇瀬美幸（うせ・みさち）――秘書。

神足雛善（こうたり・ひなよし）――研究局員。

根尾古新（ねお・ふるあら）――研究局員。

三好心視（みよし・こころみ）――研究局員。

春日井春日（かすがい・かすが）――研究局員。

兎吊木垓輔（うつりぎ・がいすけ）――≪害悪細菌≫。

哀川潤（あいかわ・じゅん）――請負人。

石丸小唄（いしまる・こうた）――大泥棒。

零崎愛識（ぜろざき・いとしき）――侵入者。

天才の一面は明らかに
醜聞（しゅうぶん）を起こし得る才能である。――芥川龍之介

Prologue

One aspect of genius is clearly
The gift of producing scandals.
-Akutagawa Ryuunosuke

"You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?"

Utsurigi abruptly, without any warning or lead-in, as if natural and preordained, without a even bit of hesitation or faltering, without a moment of thought or a trace of tact, yet not particularly with pressure or haughtiness, as if looking up at or looking down upon, slickly and smoothly as if expected, said.

I did not answer.

However, silently, I looked through the glasses of the man who was once called *Green Green Green (Malignant Bacteria)*, Utsurigi Gaisuke. Just silently, and ever silently, we looked at each other, as if facing off.

As if he were not not expecting me to answer at all from the start, Utsurigi continued his lines.

"When it comes down to it – her very existence is, for you, a cause of *hatred*, and I think she is simply an object of hatred for you. Hatred, yes, hatred. You can't deny it, can you? Of course you can't. *If only Kunagisa Tomo never existed*, you must have thought, and you won't be allowed to say you never have. *Not I*, of course, but rather yourself won't allow it. Yes – frankly, if that *Dead Blue (The Blue of the Verge of Death)* had never existed, I won't say happiness, but you may have been able to live a more ordinary life."

I did not answer.

"– have you thought about it? With that intelligent brain of yours, which was prized and treasured within the ultimate research laboratory facility, the ER3 system, that intellect that is placed so naturally among the possessions of mankind's strongest, have you just once thought about it? What Kunagisa Tomo is called *Dead Blue* by us, such a violent, cursing name, have you thought about that reason?"

I did not answer.

"Yes, even that, a small interest or a smidgen of curiosity is all the reason needed for such a tiny and narrow question, yet your mind never wandered toward it. If that is not *escape* or *fear* or *concern* toward Kunagisa Tomo, then what entirely would you say it is? Your entire life is based on fleeing from Kunagisa Tomo. The moment you encountered her you've entered into a rally to flee with all your legs' might. For example, remember. Yes, remember, the you of old. The you of old had enough of a *characteristic* such that even if you may not be able to puff out your chest with pride you still had no need to crawl along the ground in such a pathetic way, an *individualism* that caused you not to mesh into others, did you not?"

I did not answer.

"For example, even I – this Utsurigi Gaisuke has a certainly notorious alias *Green Green Green*, yet compared to *Dead Blue* it's still a hundred times more normal. It's so much more normal I may shed tears. For some reason you know of Ayanami Hyou, but even that bundle of evil, harboring specs comparable to Kunagisa Tomo, that seeker is still simply called *Cheetah (Vicious Beast)*. No, no. No, no, no, even before that. Even before that, have you ever pondered? Why Kunagisa Tomo, who was fourteen at the time, who is not not even fully twenty, why she, the small existence of a girl, or child, or even infant, was able to gather us and lead us. Yes, Kunagisa Tomo has ridiculous skills that clearly merit number one, such that calling her number two would be some sort of bad joke – no, I should call it **warfaring** that she had, but even then, she was not by a significant margin number one. Yet even then, she was without a doubt our leader. It was impossible that our leader be anyone other than her. Regarding that, you have ever once been fascinated by it?"

I did not answer.

"– that's because all of us knew. All of us understood. The eight members other than Kunagisa Tomo all, individually, ignoring what each of us may have thought ourselves, each and every one of us had the utmost knowledge and recognition. That myself, even this incredible self, alone, would never even possibly overcome this *Dead Blue*. That clump of challenging spirit and indomitable will, who would never acknowledge someone being better, that extreme egoist Hinemosu Suzu, even her, had no choice but to accept it. That is why *Dead Blue* – no, we may have been able to surpass her. We may be able to surpass her, at least. If that was all it would take, that would be simple. I don't know about the other seven and I don't really care to, but at the very least, **I** could. If I were to simulate it, it would be an easy confirmation. However, I have never thought about surpassing *Dead Blue*. To be honest, to be more open, I should say *I don't want to surpass her*. Forget that, I don't

even want to imagine it. If I'm to do that and regret it, then I'd rather stop and retreat. We all sensed it, that to step further would be enter an abnormal dimension. That's why, that's why she's called *Dead Blue*. That's why – have you ever met her brother, Kunagisa Nao?"

I did not answer.

"I haven't encountered him that often, but even then I can tell that he is rather normal, that it's clear he's an ordinary person. Do you get what that means? They're made of similar genes but there's an oppressive difference between Kunagisa Nao and Kunagisa Tomo, and what could have caused that? It means it's not a problem of genes or DNAs or anything of that foredestined sort. In other words, Kunagisa Tomo is a special abnormality. Special among special. Singular among singular, unusual among unusual, that is her, Kunagisa Tomo. Yet even then she's so out-standing that you might think it's just a joke, yet so terrible that it can't be a joke, that's the type of special abnormality she is. An oddity without comparison. You've got quite an interesting and bizarre personality, but you still can't think of yourself as stranger than Kunagisa Tomo, can you? compared to her, you're still and still, still and still and still and still within the bounds of a normal person. Although that may be slightly uncomfortable for you."

I did not answer.

"For example everyone would understand if we use mankind's strongest as an intermediary for describing *ceasing*. There can't be anyone who would oppose it. That is, after all, what is fundamentally meant by a bright, red light. However Kunagisa Tomo isn't red, in fact quite the opposite. She's the color blue, like the healthy sky, a cheerful, bright color that forgives everything and allows all. Yet regardless, her existence calls out to you and I both to cease forever and ever. Isn't that what it means? In the end, you've not taken a single step. Six years is the time you've been in that moment you met her, not learning a thing, not attaining a thing, not destroying a thing not loving a thing, and not finding a thing not abandoning a thing, six years of years and months without limit, simply, aimlessly and meaninglessly and insignificantly ceased. You've ceased the whole time. Isn't that what it means?"

I did not answer.

"That's why *Dead Blue* is a subject of hate for you. A subject of enmity. A subject of malice, and a subject of murderous will. That has to be the case, logically. The existence that definitively changed your life. No, that's wrong – the existence that definitively **did not change** your life. The existence that didn't allow change. Of course you're not a person that's just stupid and foolish and underhanded. You're stupid but sharp, foolish but smart, underhanded but clever. Within a year

you'll recognize that oppressive truth. That *Dead Blue* is just a *Killer Application (Dangerous Element)* to you. That's why I ran. That's why I ran. That's why I ran. To protect myself, I fled into that enormous, unexpected system as nothing but a symbol. I don't have any right to complain to you about that with a noisy mouth. You do technically have freedom so I'll respect that. However that escape, it wasn't even able to formulate the shape of *escape*, and brought no change to you, and as a result now you're exactly where you started, right next to Kunagisa Tomo. The same as you were six years ago, right next to Kunagisa Tomo. You must have thought? You must have wondered? And you must have known? If Kunagisa Tomo never existed. If Kunagisa Tomo never existed. If that verge of death never existed."

If I had not seen.

If I had not seen, what would have happened.

I did not answer.

"If you did not have *the ability to read people* – although that's a delusion that is far too great, and only a delusion that is both peasant and unpleasant. If not a delusion then nonsense. You saw the verge of death, and you met Kunagisa Tomo. And if that were all it would have been fine, or perhaps it would not have been better, but unfortunately you were mesmerized by her self, and beyond that, you mesmerized her self. That's so marvelous and horrible that it's unprecedented, and unheard of and describable as the ultimate bad luck. You probably realize it sufficiently, but I don't know of any worse luck. There's no misfortune greater than mutual feelings and mutual love, even moreso when it comes to a pair of existences as rare as the two of you. Don't you think? Because of your soul, which feels for her, because of her soul which feels for you, how many victims have been created? How many were wounded and fallen and rotted and buried around you two?"

I remembered them.

And them.

I did not answer.

"Just thinking back on your life a bit proves it. It's proven even without thinking back without looking back. Remember your life just a hair. Washing blood with blood, wiping meat with meat, paying for bones with bones, that's the road you've walked. Hmph. That's quite picturesque. Yes, a *symbol* –. Speaking of symbols, I touched on it a bit earlier but *Cheetah* – Ayanami Hyou. He's a boy that was the only one of us who's the same age as Kunagisa Tomo. Fourteen-years-old when

Cluster was formed. In other words, he's the same ilk as *Dead Blue*, bearing the cross on his back titled *A genius lacking in experience*, and although I won't say *that's why*, he was the most intimate with Kunagisa Tomo among the members. Intimate. I feel a bit uncomfortable saying this as a third party, much less as someone who calls himself an equal of Ayanami Hyou, but *Cheetah* was definitely in love with *Dead Blue*. He was mesmerized, and seduced. Geniuses are always alone and isolated, but that doesn't mean every genius loves that. Love of compatriots – love of the same ilk – love of the same family – or perhaps love of the same type. Not that it matters what it's called. Anyways that's how it was. You've probably heard of Ayanami Hyou's searching skills from Kunagisa Tomo, so there's no need for me to say anything, right?"

I did not answer.

"Including the leader Kunagisa Tomo we were nine, and if a single one of us were to have dropped out the group wouldn't have been able to remain intact, yet even then I can say the most central were Kunagisa Tomo, and Ayanami Hyou. If we call Kunagisa Tomo the CPU then Ayanami Hyou was the monitor. Of course, of the nine members, each and every one of us were renegades of different genres, so saying that someone was the most important or someone was the second most talented, that sort of hierarchy was impossible to call, and personally I didn't think there was a need for it either. Regardless, for Ayanami Hyou to be attracted to Kunagisa Tomo could be called fated. You understand the reason though, don't you? It's because it's you that you understand, don't you? Or perhaps you and only you can understand. So, here's a question. Do you think Kunagisa Tomo responded to Ayanami Hyou's feelings, his soul, his words?"

I did not answer.

"The answer is no. Kunagisa Tomo didn't respond at all. Surprising isn't it? Of course it's surprising. At the very least, to you it's a surprising truth. And beyond that, it's not the best of circumstances. Because of this truth, because of just this one truth, every action taken by Kunagisa Tomo toward you, one by one, begins to hold a different meaning. Flipped over – yes, upside-down would be a good expression. Although such details are not within my bounds of knowledge. Anyways, no matter how you might look at it, Kunagisa Tomo didn't respond to Ayanami Hyou's feelings. As for Ayanami Hyou, that pleasant genius probably predicted that from the start, so he didn't approach Kunagisa Tomo any more than necessary. Didn't approach – out of necessity. Of course he didn't do what you're doing now, this foolish, cute play of distancing oneself further than necessary from the verge of death. … Hmph, that's the same as then and now. Even after being plunged into prison by none other than *Dead Blue* herself, *Cheetah* still remains in contact with

Kunagisa Tomo. Irresolute or effeminate or however you may want to call it – no, that's probably not the case. That sort of young one understands through instincts – solitude doesn't just belong to themselves. Though when you get to my age you start to forget that. – By the way, you're the same age as Kunagisa Tomo, and Ayanami Hyou, aren't you? Nineteen?"

I did not answer.

"Then you must know through instinct. Of course you must, the difference between solitude and isolation. The disparity between heresy and extremities. Yes, with regards to that, what you think is generally correct. Utsurigi Gaisuke will say correct! I shall present to you a bouquet of correctness. With regards to that, you have no need to have general notions, not that there's any place for that to begin with. Rest assured. There are other things that you must fret over. That's the case for anything, but there being multitudes of things simultaneously in multitudes of places isn't favorable when it comes to processing. That's what I think. You have walked a road filled with copious amounts of misery and distress, but the road-less desert stretching out before you is overflowing with even more mortification. I'll forewarn you about that here."

What Utsurigi wanted to say.

I did not know.

I did not answer.

"This Utsurigi Gaisuke ate out of the same bowl as Kunagisa Tomo for a duration of four years, so there is none other that Utsurigi Gaisuke can warn you about. Anything else would be without exaggeration useless. It'd be troublesome if you were to rely on me to escape from the existence of Kunagisa Tomo. Because I've never crossed over to **that side**. You've already crossed past the verge of death. That's why neither I nor for instance Ayanami Hyou would be able to provide you with words of assistance. If there is a word of advice I could provide, it would simply be words of comfort – "*It's too late*" "*Too bad*" "*How pitiable*"."

What Utsurigi did not want to say.

I did not know.

I did not answer.

"You've already, a distant time ago, a far away time ago, in your eternal past approached the end. That means you're at a dead end. Whether you've realized it yourself, whether you're aware or unaware or conscious or subconscious, isn't something that I can determine from my vantage point. However I think that may have been for the best. It may be cruel to you but I fundamentally support

Kunagisa Tomo. She was never enamored by me, but I was enamored by her. I was attracted to her, a whole block of years my junior. That's why I can be satisfied if Kunagisa Tomo finds happiness. But that's the same for you, isn't it? You, too, along with me and Ayanami, can not care as long as Kunagisa Tomo is fine with it. Everything else – yourself included, doesn't matter."

I did not answer.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of. Not something to be ashamed of for even a bit or smidgen. That's the level of seduction and attraction commanded by that Kunagisa Tomo. The beautiful words *revere* and *worship* fit her perfectly. They fit so perfectly they can't be removed. Precisely in that way, with a bit of exaggeration, we can say she's the object of religious worship. You and I are not alone in that compared to Kunagisa Tomo we're but boring objects. It doesn't matter whether we're dead or alive, and I can say that without bitterness or cynicism. If she's One, then we're One of Quadrillion, and if we're One, then she's Quadrillion. If for her happiness one or two victims are made, if several lives *cease*, then that's nothing, it's so trivial that it's nothing. I don't care about for the greater good or for the greater happiness. That's not a legitimate phrase in front of her. And you probably feel the same. You must be the same."

I did not answer.

"*Dead Blue* calls to us. That beautiful voice calls to us, the warfront soldiers. Even now, if you listen carefully, we can hear her noble voice– "*Make Hell the Hell named Hell. Massacre the Massacre named Massacre. Guilt the Guilt named Guilt. Despair the Despair named Despair. Confuse the Confusion named Confusion, dominate the Domination named Domination. Don't hold back, none can obstruct us. Be proud, we, of this beautiful world. This is the bedroom of the verge of death, rampage all you want as the verge of death allows it*–" it makes your heart quiver. It makes your hair rise all over your body. She's too much of a ruler. We're not talking about taking over the world, the world is simply a disposable toy for *Dead Blue*, an existence only until she bores of it. Of course, that goes for us, too. To her, I'm just a toy that was slightly useful. –I definitely don't know how you are to her – but because I don't know I ask: so, what sort of toy are you to her?"

I did not answer.

"We have to be her toys. I'll repeat again that it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Being a factor on her road is something to be proud of in this world. There's nothing to feel inferior about, so you should be more boastful about it. Slaves have the happiness of slaves, they say. Boast at me, that I'm more useful to Kunagisa Tomo than you by far, isn't that wonderful – or something. I have enough gumption to accept that much. Why're you always fidgeting about? Being used and thrown

away by her is a point of honor. Being stepped on and crushed by her is a point of honor. What're you so ashamed of?"

I did not answer.

"I – *Green Green Green* once violated the world under her orders. *Cheetah*. *Double-flick (Two-Layered World)*, everyone brought revolution to the world. We didn't seek to be heroes. We didn't seek to be called demons. I had but one wish – we had but one wish. That we wanted to be useful to *Dead Blue* – that we wanted to live for her. I'm not lying in saying that was it. With regards to the exploits of rewriting the world, with regards to the divine work of recreating history, I have no thoughts whatsoever. Crushing what was called by the public a Mansion of Demons brought about no satisfactory sense of justice, and splattering the bits and pieces of an innocent little girl's body caused no guilt to bubble forth. Acquiring a mountain of treasure didn't satisfy any material craving, and acting out a happy end at the end of a tearjerking tragedy caused no emotions to bubble forth. None of that matters to me. My goal – no, my **reason** was before and after always singular. Singular, without choosing or losing. Singular, without jesting or joking. Blessings to her. Happiness to her. Amusement to her. Joy to her. I, in the name of *Green Green Green* – destroyed everything for her. Destroyed, and destroyed what I had destroyed, and destroyed once more the things I had destroyed on top of destroying. I'll do anything for her. You should be the same. You'd do anything for her – you'd abandon anything for her. You'd crush the world for her. You too, for her – would kill yourself. Isn't that right?"

I did not answer.

"However, – however that's a hypothesis and theory that only works when Kunagisa Tomo, that *Dead Blue* would actually achieve happiness. Kunagisa Tomo herself is the only one who can determine whether something falls under the vague expression called happiness – but that's all the same. The same as me being mesmerized by Kunagisa Tomo, and even more than you being mesmerized by Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo is mesmerized by you. From my perspective I can only see from within the castle of reasoning, but she would probably do anything for you. She would listen to anything you say. She would forgive anything you do. If you were to tell her to die, she would probably die. Just as you're obedient to her, she's obedient to you. That's what's called mutual feelings, mutual love – but, in that case we can think this way, too. What if you and *Dead Blue* are similar and share a similar relationship, then just as your time has ceased by being with Kunagisa Tomo, then what if, just the same, because of you, Kunagisa Tomo's time has also ceased–"

I.

I. I.

I did not answer.

"Of course, as I said, this is just a theory. A theory, one with no materials and wrought by thinking after having the answer in front of me. Yet it's a theory with quite a bit of truthfulness, one that's worth thinking about. No matter how much blessedness and accursedness are but relative to each person's perceptions, and that reports of observations by third-party people are just meddlesome delusions that are neither greater than or less than intrusive, those that have failed to die and cease themselves with their own hands cannot attain happiness no matter what sort of meaning you may attribute to the word. Just as you cannot attain happiness no matter what, does that also mean that Kunagisa Tomo also will never taste true happiness? Just as the singular existence Kunagisa Tomo is a reason for you, couldn't it be said that you are just the very same singular existence to Kunagisa Tomo? Then *ceasing* is a paradox, spiraling, returning to Kunagisa Tomo through you. The verge of death becomes a dead end by overcoming herself. For as long as she's with you. For as long as you exist."

I.

I. I.

I did not answer.

"Yet here's why it's even more terrible, it's that this doesn't mean you need just disappear. Let's say I kill you here and now. Utsurigi Gaisuke murders you. This isn't just a hypothetical that lacks realism. As I said earlier, I've got no problems murdering for *Dead Blue*. At the very extreme least, I'm mesmerized by her enough for that. That's why, for instance, I delete and annihilate your existence so that not a shred remains. However. That also means that I'd simultaneously be annihilating Kunagisa Tomo. A temporary stoppage simply becomes an eternal stoppage. That's not all. Nothing changes, in fact things would get worse. How terrifying. How disgusting. The status quo must be abandoned in order to move toward the ideal, yet that ideal simply results in the worst, and the next-most ideal strategy doesn't exist. You're done for. And Kunagisa Tomo is also done for. From here onwards, the two of you will continue to end the eternity of time. Not just done for, but continuing to end. I can't think of a better phrase than brutal. You, and you two, are really pitiful existences. That's why, I have to ask you. I have that right, and you have the obligation to answer. So please, truthfully, without falsifying anything, without leaving open any crack that may invite

suspicion, just simply, will you answer me?”

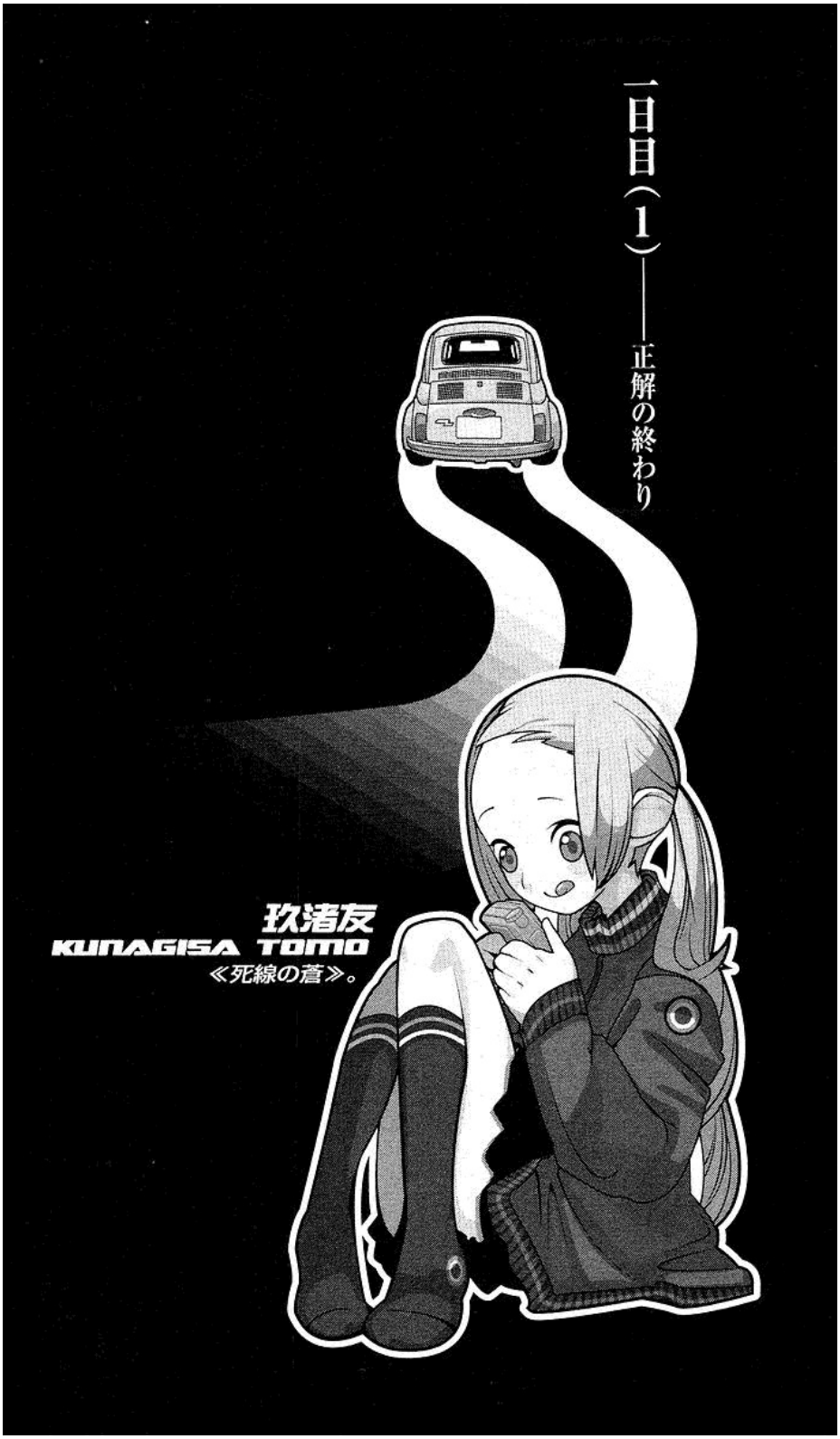
Utsurigi said.

“Don’t you actually hate Kunagisa Tomo?”

I.

I. I.

I–


一日目（1）——正解の終わり
KUNAGISA TOMO
玖渚友
《死線の蒼》。

Day 1 (1)

The End of Correctness

0

Now then.

Hello, everybody.

Please accompany me for just a little while.

1

"So, Tomo. His – what was his name? Utsurigi, what sort of guy is he entirely?"

It was a borrowed car, so I should really not be talking and distracting myself from driving, but around me was just one person and one dog, and nary a single car in sight, and it was so rural that one could assume that even public construction had not touched this place in the past ten years. Actually, it may not even be a mistake to call this a dirt path. There were no stoplights and probably no danger of being in an accident, but even so I lowered the speed a bit, as I asked Kunagisa Tomo, sitting in the assistant driver's seat.

Kunagisa looked fascinated as she tilted her head to the side, "Uni?" and then, "Didn't I tell you? Ii-chan."

"I thought I sat down and explained to you a lot about Sacchan."

"No, I never heard."

I responded, but if Kunagisa said so, then I probably did receive an explanation. Kunagisa Tomo's memory is as accurate as a precision machine, and my memory is inaccurate enough to require precise investigation. In other words of in other words, I forget things brilliantly. However, forgetting is the same as not knowing.

“Umm. Sacchan, right-.”

“Start there. Why *Sacchan*? He is Utsurigi Gaisuke, right? How do you turn his name into *Sacchan*?”

“Hmm… I see.”

In any case I accepted her explanation, but still pondered her naming sense. After all, how is it to make a nickname of a nickname?

”*Sacchan* from *Saikin* (Bacteria)… sounds like an elementary school kid being bullied.”

“Mmm. Sacchan wasn’t like that, though. If anything that’s more Chii-kun’s role, and Sacchan was the opposite, the bully type. But you’re right, Sacchan was a bit different inside the *Team*, like the one loner. You know, like he was colored differently.”

“More than you?”

“Boku-sama-chan was everyone’s manager, so it’s not right for me to be different or odd.”

”……”

Well, nothing to say.

I had recently learned to stay silent.

“Chii-kun was, what was it? A seeker, if I remember correctly.”

“Yup. A transcendent, shred seeker who could look for anything as long as it’s within the galaxy. I don’t know what woulda happened if it weren’t for Chii-kun this time, either. It took a while to get his help though, because Chii-kun hated Sacchan.”

“Don’t know what woulda happened, eh…” but even now, after having received Chii-kun’s help, I could not fathom what would happen.

“And so? If Chii-kun was a seeker, then Sacchan… what was Utsurigi for? Did he know the secret to the Big Bang?”

“Nope,” Kunagisa quickly rejected. “Ii-chan, I think you’ve misunderstood, but Chii-kun’s *searching* is really on a different plane. I think putting it this way might be crass, but even if I take a hundred years or a thousand years, I might not be able to find something Chii-kun finds in one day. Chii-kun was that outlandish even among the *Team*.”

“Hmm… that is certainly unexpected.”

Insidentally, that Chii-kun is currently residing in the maximum security prison in the United States for something like a 150 year term. And if I remember correctly, Chii-kun was the same age,

nineteen, as Kunagisa and I, so, yes, currently medicine is bountiful and improving, so he may be able to come out while he's still alive.

"That's why, compared to Chii-kun, Sacchan's spec goes down a few levels. Of course, they specialize differently, so it's not something that I can simply compare, but. It's like comparing Hiei Mountain and Kamogawa River."

"That comparison does not allow for comprehension of magnitude… so? What is his specialization?"

"Yup. Sacchan's specialization was *cracking* everything."

"So he's a cracker…"

"Yup," nodded Kunagisa Tomo. "There're lots of explanations for the differences between crackers and hackers, but in Sacchan's case, in *Utsurigi Gaisuke*'s case alone, there's no difference. Sacchan devoted every bit of his specifications into *destroying*. Specifications that might have even been able to comprise the best all-rounder were dumped purely into *destroying*, so he's a specialized, extremely specialized, too specialized, cracker."[1)]

"Just to crack?"

"Just to crack," Kunagisa said, in a rare exception to her carefreeness, with a bit of wistfulness. "As you'd guess from his name, he's someone with a very strong sense of self, Sacchan. He's not someone with a bad attitude like Chii-kun, but like, harassing is the norm for him, or like, he loves bothering other people, or like, something like that."

"So you are trying to say that his personality is not bad."

"He was a man of character. He was the second oldest of the members, after all. Ah, but I guess in this case age doesn't matter. Maybe, not sure."

"How do you write his name?"

"*Tree for hanging rabbits*, I think. And then Gai as in a hundred quintillion, and the Suke with the vehicle radical. Boku-sama-chan didn't call the others by real name, so I don't really remember, though."[2)]

Just his name made me think ill of him.

Well, not that I could say anything.

"However, I do not understand… why is that person with such a strong sense of self in the notorious *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou Research Laboratory? I do not understand the reason. Did Chii-

kun not explain that to you?"

"Mm. Like I said, Chii-kun hated Sacchan. He only told me the place. But, just finding out that Shadou Kyouichirou's research laboratory is in Aichi, when no one even knew if it was in Japan, was pretty helpful. I could have just asked Nao-kun but Nao-kun is Nao-kun and has plenty of Nao-kun business to take care of."

"Helpful… having to go there is pretty heavy on me, though…"

"Really?"

"Well, it is not like I can go happily as if I were to going to Universal Studios Japan."

I leaned into the handle and sighed.

We went from Kyoto to Oosaka to Nara, and should already be in Mie. I wondered if Mie was part of the Kinki region or the Chubu region. If it counted as part of the Chubu region, then it means we were getting closer to our destination, the Aichi prefecture. I looked at the analog wrist watch Hime-chan had given me the other day and noted that more than three hours had already passed since we had departed from Kyoto. If we had used a highway we should already be reaching our destination, but the previous month, and the month before that, I had been wounded here and there around both arms, and as that had finally been supposed to fully heal a few days ago, I wanted to avoid driving on the highway.

This was not a trip that required us to hurry anyways.

Because in this case, it was not time that was important.

"That's right, Inoji."[3)]

Then.

From the rear seat that had been silent this whole time came a voice. I turned my head just a little and said, "Were you awake, Suzunashi-san." And in a slightly unhappy way,

"I woke up because Inoji and Ao-chan were yipping and yapping. Even Sleeping Beauty would wake up to that noise. Driving should be done silently."[4)]

Suzunashi-san said.

"To begin with, the rear seats on Fiats are really narrow… they aren't suited for sleeping. I don't get Asano's tastes. She prefers Japanese style things, but her car's foreign, and it's this narrow, inconvenient car to boot. And it doesn't have horsepower. Does it even have an engine? Asano's thinking process is a mystery. Inoji, don't you agree?"

"No comment, to that."

I figured, Suzunashi-san gave a suppressed chuckle.

"And, Suzunashi-san, what were you saying "*That's right*" to?"

"Hmm," she nodded. "To Ao-chan, Professor Kyouichirou, and that Utsurigi-san are both old acquaintances, and are people she can speak to without any worry as similar *specialists*. Even you, Inoji, you've come through ER3 or HMO or whatnot, you studied abroad at those fancy research systems for five years, so you've steeped yourself in them, right? But this is the first time I'll see a professor or a researcher or that type of person. I don't know how heavy this is to you, but it's even heavier for me."

"That's, unexpected coming from you, Suzunashi-san."

"You know, despite how I look, I'm the type to have anxiety over strangers. How to speak to people like research professors who've studied all their lives, I can't even imagine. I don't even know how to get the volume of a cone."

"Hmm. I see… by the way, Suzunashi-san, do you like *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*?"

"I don't dislike it."

"Then it will be alright. You will do just fine."

"….. is that how it is? Even so, really… Inoji. I'd rather this be the last time. I accepted because Asano asked, but I'm not that bored. Really, I can't win against crying kids, estate stewards, and Asano Miiko."

"I appreciate it."

"Appreciation can be done by anyone. Something that can be done by anyone is boring. Do something that only you can do, Inoji."

She said, and Suzunashi-san lay down on her side on the narrow rear seats. Suzunashi-san is pretty tall for a female – or rather, even for men 180 cm is pretty big – so she seemed wanting for space. And she wore a pure black suit, which was rather formal and showed no pinch of seasonal awareness, along with a perfectly fitting cutter shirt and even a necktie, so it seemed even harder to sleep.

Suzunashi Neon.

My neighbor at the apartment I live in, and friend of the owner of this Fiat 500 Asano Miiko-san,

of twenty-five years of age. Normally she worked at the Enryaku temple at the Hiei Mountains , and sometimes came down from there. Through Miiko-san I had met her several times, but this was the first time Kunagisa and Suzunashi-san had met.

"And, Inoji. How long until we arrive?"

"I do not know… is Mie part of the Chubu region?"

"Kinki."

Is that so. Then, I think it will take a bit."

"Inoji. Chubu or Kinki doesn't matter when it comes to Mie and Aichi being next to each other. It doesn't change the time."

"Ah, that is right. I had forgotten."

"Normally you don't forget things like that. Ii-chan, don't tell me you can only name half the prefectures?"

"That is going too far. Who cannot name all the prefectures?"

"I can't. I thought Hiei Mountains was in Kyoto until the other day."

"That mistake is a bit impossible…"

"I had no idea that Kyoto had an ocean, too."

"Please do not sound so proud about that…"

"Hah. I suck at math but I suck at social studies, too. I graduated elementary school without realizing that Australia and Austria are different. I can't tell the difference between Mongol and China. But that doesn't matter. It doesn't bother me one bit in life."

"Is that so."

"That's right. There're only a few things that a person needs to know to live as a person. Though recently there're more and more people who don't even know those things."

She said sarcastically, and lowered the brim of her hat over her eyes.

That outfit to go with her crow-colored hair, a stylish form with her long legs, and with that hat, I could only think of Jigen Daisuke, but Jigen Daisuke's seat was always the assistant driver's seat, which was currently occupied by a nonchalant blue-haired girl, so that ruined it. Well, the driver being me was nothing close to Lupin III's standards.

"But really, I apologize for making you do this. If Miiko-san had nothing to do it would have been perfect–"

“Inoji,” Suzunashi-san said, her hat still covering her eyes. “I understand that this circumstance called for it, but I would personally rather you avoid making Asano a character in these sorts of stories. She’s always been too good to people, always poking her nose into other peoples’ stuff. Actually you could say she was one of those thanks-but-don’t-do-this-again types, where she’d go around forcing her way into issues. And, if she were incompetent that’d be alright, but Asano’s tends to be useful. I don’t like praising friends, but Asano’s top-class with swordsmanship, and she’s actually pretty good with other stuff. And most importantly, she’s not very smart. Or to be blunt, she’s stupid. And not just any stupid, she’s insanely stupid. That’s why she’s the type to get used by people and get the worst of it.”

“Are you praising her?”

“I’m praising her. What else would this be? Anyways, I don’t think that you’re that type of person at all, but I’d still rather you keep trouble away from her. From me, too, of course.”

“I understand.”

“Probably. You understand and still do it, so you’re even worse. Really, I wish you’d just sit still. I won’t say relying on others is bad, but I don’t think it’s good to rely on others to do something that you can do yourself. Doing it alone is always more efficient than doing it together. Too many captains will steer a ship up a mountain, so to speak.”

“I actually think that is amazing. Making a ship go up a mountain is quite astonishing.”

“Stop trying to misdirect this. And if you never reach the goal, then whatever the process was is still worthless. Remember that.”

I had not seen Suzunashi-san in a while, and it seemed she still liked lecturing. However, as the party that had requested the near-impossible, I had the obligation to tag along with a bit of tongue-lashing.

And, Suzunashi-san is not wrong, anyways.

She was just slightly not correct.

“Sorry, Neon-chan,” Kunagisa said. “But this time we desperately needed a chaperone. Boku-sama-chan and Ii-chan are both underage. Boku-sama-chan might be alright with common sense, but you know, Ii-chan…”

“Nothing for Ao-chan to apologize over. You’re a bishoujo after all.”[5)]

“It is alright because she is a bishoujo?”

"Don't ask the obvious," said Suzunashi-san with a fearless chuckle. "The value of a bishoujo trumps and tramples the values of everything else. Noble or righteous or pleasant or compassionate or a road or virtue or benevolence or love, all of that riffraff is nothing but dust in front of a bishoujo."

Her extremely skewed sense of value, her philosophy of *people are categorized as bishoujo, myself, and everyone else* still seemed to be in healthy effect.

Well, they do say people lust for what they do not have, and sticking your neck or mouthing off about the value systems of other people is not a good way to go about doing anything.

"Well, I'll go catch another wink. I'd been working all-nighters lately so I'm atrociously sleepy. I can't think of words to describe this atrocity. So, Inoji, please wake me up when we get there."

"Acknowledged and understood."

I replied, and for a while after, the road seemed to have become more filled, so I began focusing on driving. Suzunashi-san quickly entered began sleeping (however, it was still incredible that she could sleep in such a place), and I could hear her snoring. Kunagisa was fiddling with her pocket computer. I would not be able to even begin to imagine what this nerd and geek and maniac and otaku blue-hair could be doing, so I did not ask what she was doing.

And then, I thought.

About the place where we were headed, about the man we were to meet.

"Utsurigi Gaisuke…"

If you are someone who has dabbled to any extent in the world of electronic engineering, someone who has stepped foot even a little into the territory of mechanical engineering, or perhaps someone who has stuck their neck into underworld of society, then there is no way you would not know of the fame of *Team*. During that era (yes, it had already become its own era) it was impossible to avoid them.

Some called them electronic terrorists and others dubbed them pioneers in virtual space, yet others graded them criminals, and different people worshiped them as saviors. However, not one could be said to be correct, and in turn one could not call them anything and be incorrect, so you could say that it was like describing one facet of truth.

In other words, that sort of *Team* existed. In that world, using the vague pronouns like *them* and *those guys* always referred to that bunch. Of course, while their existence was famous, what sort of group they were, what purpose they were formed for, or even if they were really a group, was publicly unknown. *Team* disintegrated without leaving a single trace. That further turned the

existence of *Team* into a legend, a myth.

That was why.

For example, if I were to say that the girl sitting next to me as if she were in paradise was the leader of that group, no one would believe me. And if I were to say that the *Team* that engaged in the enormous damaging activities and the humongous creation activities, that the *Team* that was dubbed the *Brigade of Fanatic Cultists*, was just a small group of nine people, no one would believe me.

One of those nine was the man we were going to meet.

In other words, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

What process Kunagisa had undergone to meet the other eight members, including Utsurigi, and for what motive she began performing her crime-for-pleasure (though they may have been too destructive to just be called that) activities, I do not know. Currently that was outside of the firing range of my interests, and I also felt it was not something to be asked lightly.

No – honestly.

Honestly, this was not one of those things. That was just an excuse, and a single favorable facet of interpretation. Honestly, probably, with regards to those things, I simply did not want to know. In that blank space that had been formed between Kunagisa and myself, what incidents had happened. I do not want to tell Kunagisa, and what had happened to Kunagisa, I do not want to know.

Kunagisa Tomo.

The one and only friend of mine.

I was still living in Kanbe when I came to know her, and it was a time when I had not yet surpassed the blossoming age of thirteen. Five years ago – no, it was closer to six years, I should say. For half a year, I shared the passing of time with this blue-colored girl, and, after half a year we split ways. We did not keep in touch and five years passed, and we had reunited several months ago.

Five years.

That was enough time for a person to change, but in the end, I did not change much, and Kunagisa as well, was hardly different from before. Aside from the fact that she had created an absurd curriculum vitae in her past, that she had made eight friends in a place I did not know of, and that she had split ways with eight friends in a place I did not know of.

When Kunagisa speaks of them, she seems genuinely happy. When she told me about *Chii-kun* who can grasp anything in the galaxy, also known as Ayanami Hyou, and when she was explaining *Sacchan* also known as Utsurigi Gaisuke this time, she always seems truly happy. As if she were showing off a prized treasure, she always became really happy.

I was not pleased by that.

I did not know why, but it bothered me.

"In other words, just jealousy…."

I felt like that was also a bit wrong, but it also probably was not off enough to bother explaining. I am not saintly enough to accept and forgive everything, and I also do not have an honest-enough personality to convert Kunagisa's happiness to become my own happiness. Truth be told, it was hard for me to say I had pleasant feelings toward those eight, whom inhabited a place closer to Kunagisa than myself. I would not say enmity, but this feeling was probably not one of fondness.

However.

However, in this case, more than this melancholic feeling.

"It is so heavy…"

"Why?"

I had meant to say that to be unheard, but Kunagisa responded to my talking to myself. Of course, this being Kunagisa, she did not take her eyes off her pocket computer. She was proficient with multitasking, to the point where one could wonder if she had several thousand brains. A long time ago, she was able to perform an inhuman feat of controlling 128 computers at once. When you think about that, then this sort of thing is simple. It was not that she lacked concentration, but rather that she could split her concentration in every which way and then some and still have concentration left over.

In other words, when that concentration focused toward a single truth – it was easy for her to wage war against the world.

"What's heavy, Ii-chan? Or was *heavy* a pun? Hmm, that's funny. Boku-sama-chan thinks that's funny."

"I would not say something like that… just talking to myself. No need to worry about it."

"Then I won't. But you know, Ii-chan, you don't need to worry that much. Sacchan doesn't bother anyone he doesn't actually care for."

"That would be helpful, but the source of my anxiety lies elsewhere…"

"You mean, Professor Kyouichirou's place is making you anxious?"

"To be blunt, well, yes."

I nodded.

Shadou Kyouichirou Research Laboratory. According to Chii-kun's information, Utsurigi Gaisuke was currently *working* as a Fellow there, and it was one of the scarce research laboratories in Japan that had no background pressure and was for purely research. I had heard much about the esteem and prestige of that research organization several times, and remembered. Remembered. For me, with this brain of mine that has such problems remembering things that one might think it was created entirely of resisters, this was nothing short of a miracle, and I could follow by saying that this proved the incredible-ness of the laboratory. And more than anything, the manager of that laboratory, Shadou Kyouichirou, presided over fame that rivaled that of *Team*.

As *Mad Demon Kyouichirou*.

As you can glean from that alias, he is widely known, but he is also a researcher that is not widely respected. Mathematical biology, form machinery, animal behavior, molecular theory, et cetera et cetera, he traversed multiple specializations, and was someone who pioneered multiple sciences. That sort of background, and his own **qualities** combined and created an eccentric scientist on a class of his own. He is currently sixty-three, yet he still performs research in that laboratory facility, they say.

"You have met Professor Kyouichirou, right?"

"Yup. But that was before I met Ii-chan. Boku-sama-chan was around twelve then, I think."

"Mmm. Twelve."

"The research facility was in Hokkaido then… I went with Nao-kun."

"Huh, is that so."

"Yup. Nao-kun still had free time then."

Nao-kun would be Kunagisa's bigger brother, Kunagisa Nao. He possessed an ordinary personality that would make you doubt that he shared parents with Kunagisa Tomo, and six years ago, I came to be under his care for quite a bit. Nao-san currently works properly as a secretary for his father (which in other words means Kunagisa's father as well, but Kunagisa's been long disowned), so we did not have the opportunity to see him much.

“Professor Kyouichirou was pretty sharp then, but it seems he became even more twisted since then. He got a lot of warnings from higher up, so now he hides his location and continues research with a few elite, so he’s pretty abnormal.”

“You are calling someone else abnormal?”

“Abnormals know abnormals,” Kunagisa said with a bit of pride. “Set a thief to catch a theif, I think? Hmm, but in this case it might be more right to say set a theif to catch a thief.”[6)]

“I see…” I nodded absentmindedly. “So would it simply be that he is like a mad scientist?”

“Yup. Like a mad scientist.”

“You know… so, what is he researching as he coops up in the mountains? That Professor Kyouichirou.”

“Seven years ago, to be really rough he was working on artificial intelligence. But that’s a really rough way of putting it. Yup, that was the trendy thing back then, artificial intelligence. Boom-ment, I think they’re called? It was one of those things. Of course Professor was working on something a bit different.”

“I have made an artificial intelligence before. As part of my class across the ocean.”

“Boku-sama-chan’s made stuff like that a lot, too. Hii-chan was the best of us at that though. Hii-chan always said, *Talking to a person and singing chords to an artificial intelligence are similar, because they’re similar in that they’re incompetent*.”

“That one also sounds like an asshole…”

“Pretty much. Boku-sama-chan might have been the only good girl. Anyways, when boku-sama-chan met Professor before, he was doing innovation or pioneering into artificial intelligence as a whole, I think. But just as there’re trends in the world, there’re also abandonment in the world, so there’re rumors that he’s not working on research on artificial intelligence as seriously anymore. I don’t know what he’s working on, but he’s probably still somewhere related to something like cybernetics.”

“Hmm…”

“But that aside, he’s probably doing something that can’t get funding. He’s that kinda person. Really, always has been.”

Kunagisa said with a bored tone, and stuck out her lips a bit in a pouting way. This was a rare delivery for Kunagisa Tomo. I said nothing, because it was obvious that Utsurigi was causing her to

react this way. I did not intend to say anything, anyways.

I shut up and continued driving.

“But there’s nothing for Ii-chan to worry about. The professor also doesn’t care for people he doesn’t care for. His personality is actually really bad, but Ii-chan just has to come along with boku-sama-chan. As long as you’re with boku-sama-chan, everything’ll be alright.”

“Is that so. That is a thankful thing, really.”

Of course, that was probably the truth. For *Green Green Green* Utsurigi Gaisuke and *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou, an ordinary private university student like myself meant nothing. Given prior experience, I am quite aware of that fact about myself, so I did not feel much (although not much is what you make of it) anxiety over that. Really, I had not said anything to Kunagisa, and I had no intention of saying anything, but the source of my anxiety came from somewhere else. And that anxiety would most likely materialize within the first day.

”… sigh… I still feel heavy.”

And that too, ultimately, would simply be destiny that could only be called coincidence. There is nothing that can be done about it. My life is only worth that much, after all. Flowingly flowing with the flow. I did not have much dissatisfaction with that. Just anxious, that was all.

“Nn. Looks like we’re in Aichi. Then, take the next left, Ii-chan.”

“Really? That takes us even deeper into the mountain path.”

The road had long since turned into a dirt path that had not been maintained at all. If you looked outside the window, you would see nothing but Cryptomeria trees. People with pollen allergies might get goosebumps seeing that. When you are in a place like this, you might even wonder if the Earth is truly lacking trees.

“The laboratory is deep into the mountain. This place isn’t on the map, so we hafta rely on memory.”

“Hmm… that is fine. Your navigation will not have any errors. But how much more to go? Depending on distance, I may need to refuel soon. This car really does not have horsepower.”

“Soon. It should be around the border of Mie and Aichi. But Aichi is really nice. Lots of smart people.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s so. It’s where the Nagoya-uchi was found. It’s a region with a blessing. I think that’s why

Professor ended up settling his laboratory in Aichi. It's probably not just idiocy, and I don't think he had any money issues… Ahh. But I'm looking forward to this. Seeing Sacchan again, it's been so long."

"That is fine, but please think about **after seeing him**. You didn't come to Aichi to just sight-see, right? I don't intend to be much of a help to you this time, either."

"Hmm? Why? Jealousy?" grinned Kunagisa Tomo with a bit of happiness. "Ii-chan always looks uncaring, but you get pretty jealous easily. You're narrow-minded at crucial moments, or something. You can relax, you know? I mean, boku-sama-chan likes Sacchan and Chii-kun, but I only love Ii-chan."

"That is precious. But this is not about jealousy. It is different from that. Well, I say it is different but I guess if you were to describe it, it would be similar… oh."

I saw a silhouette in front, so I put my focus back in front. A pair of men wearing uniforms that looked like they belonged to security waved sticks that glowed red, and called for us to stop our car. I looked more closely and noticed that there was a big gate behind them that could be described as a steel fence.

This deep in the mountains, security.

"….."

I stepped on the brakes and stopped the car, then slowly opened the window. And then the two security guards approached the Fiat, and with a gruff voice said to us.

"From here on this place is private property, and would constitute trespassing. Please return the way you came."

They spoke polite words, but the way they spoke was extremely abrasive. Well, being forced to stand out here in this damn hot weather would make anyone turn out like that. Complaining about such small things in this circumstance is something only a truly horrible person would do. It is not my role to criticize their lack of professionalism. And, it was honestly hard to tell if their attitude was out of lack of professionalism, anyways.

"No, um, well. We have an appointment with Professor Shadou."

"Professor? Th- then, you're Kunagisa-sama?"

The security guards' attitudes quickly changed. They probably did not think someone with the backing of Kunagisa would be driving such a shoddy car, so it would still be harsh to chide them for that.

"I am not from Kunagisa… but I am with her."

I said, and pointed to Kunagisa sitting next to me with my thumb. Kunagisa Tomo herself remained staring at her pocket computer, and did not look at the security guards. However, her blue hair seemed to be a sufficient symbol, as the security guards nodded, "Understood."

"Then you are Kunagisa-sama's friend… there should be one more, a chaperone…"

"Ahh, then…" I shifted my thumb that was pointing at Kunagisa to the rear seats. "… Shall I wake her up? I do not mind, but I cannot guarantee anything in that case."

"……. no, that's fine."

The security guard said after a few seconds of silence. Yes, that is the wise choice, I thought. No one needs to step on a landmine with excessive force.

"Then, please write your name on the visitors' list. It may seem a bother, but it's part of our procedure."

"Sure."

With Kunagisa being that and Suzunashi being that, I would have to be the one. I opened the door, and left the car. The security guard, who had returned to what looked like the guard outpost (it seemed prefab, and made me sweat just looking at it) came back with an A4-size clipboard. And then, "please sign here," and handed me a ballpoint-pen. I had thought I would be typing into a computer, so I was a bit surprised by the anachronism.

"Yeah. I agree. However, the Professor says *they can't trick their way through this*. That if you use a computer or something that manages things, then improper access from outside becomes possible, is what he said. Well, I do not understand what he means, but in any case, he says *handwriting on paper* is the safest way of saving information."

"I will not say I do not understand his point, but he sounds very paranoid…"

I said as I wrote Kunagisa's name, Suzunashi-san's name, and then my name. Address… in Suzunashi-san's case, what should I write here? Would it be fine as Hiei Mountains Enryaku Temple? I cannot just write no specific address so I have to write something, but *Hiei Mountain* and *No Address* are both equally suspicious. After pondering such rude-to-Hiei-Mountain-inhabitants thoughts, I ended up writing that Suzunashi-san lived in the same place that I do. It was too painful to joke about to write such a thing, but I felt it was a lie that would at least be something we could laugh about afterward.

"Have you brought anything dangerous?" the other security guard asked me as I was left in

thought. “Blades and powerful medicines cannot be brought in…”

“Blade… I brought a scissors…” I answered. “Is a scissors no good? He sounds really paranoid…”

“No, that should be fine. I apologize, please do not take this the wrong way. The security level has been upgraded since yesterday. We’re required to ask even Kunagisa-sama and her associates these questions.”

“The level was upgraded? Why?”

“Ahh…” the security guard looked conflicted a bit. And then he lowered his voice and continued. “Well… This would be two days ago. But there was alarm over an intruder.”

An intruder, I responded. That did not sound pleasant. I wondered if intruders to a research laboratory like this would mean an industrial spy or something. That seemed like an unrealistic thing to imagine, like from a movie or a book, but this place is unrealistic anyways (after all, it’s a *research laboratory deep in the mountains*, which makes me laugh), so it may be expected. Rather, in this case, I should be relieved that the security level was not raised because *Kunagisa Tomo is coming*.

“Yes. See, it’s the name at the top of the visitor list,” said the security guard who I had given the board back to, and he handed it back to me, and said. “Bastard walked right through this gate, feigning being a visitor from a different lab. To trespass in a way that gets detected so quickly, really disrespecting us, or just really strong-willed, or reckless…”

”… and, that *intruder*, was he caught already?”

“Ah, no… not yet…” the security guard said, a bit awkwardly. “However, please be assured. It seems they have already escaped from within the laboratory, so there should be no bother caused to Kunagisa-sama. And, the police have already been notified, so it should be a matter of time before they are apprehended.”

Is that so, then that is a relief, I nodded. Intruders and spies were a violent word, but if they had already left then it should have no direct bearing on our story. Whether they are arrested by police afterwards or whatever matters not to us. He is not here, and that is sufficient. This is already convoluted, so I would rather avoid a new character.

“If you continue along this route with the mountain, you will reach a pretty large parking space. Please park your car there. There should be a person from the lab coming to greet you there, so just follow their directions after that. After about five minutes from the parking lot, you will reach the laboratory.”

"Understood. Thank you for your careful instructions."

I nodded. And then, without any care, truly without any care, I glanced at the name of the *intruder* written at the top of the clipboard. Of course, an intruder would not write their real name on this clipboard, so it must be a fake name, but I was just slightly curious about what fake name they may have used.

And, my eyes, stopped.

"… this name."

"Huh? Yes. It's a rather laughable name, isn't it? I thought it was suspicious because of it… but there's no point dwelling on it now…" the security guard complained. "… however, that name, how would you read it? *Reishiki Aishiki*, perhaps?"

"No… Zerozaki Itoshiki, I believe."

I said, and returned the clipboard to the security guard, and then said "farewell" and returned to the car. The security guards ran back to the gate, and began opening the gate. I restarted the engine that was set to idling stop.

"Mm? Ii-chan, what happened? You've got a worse mood now. Like 55%."

"No. I got permission to go through without any problems. No problems whatsoever." I responded without any emotion. "There's nothing for you to worry about."

I started the car, and went through the gate. As we went along the road the security guard had instructed us about, "those security guards," the voice from the rear seats sounded again.

"I wonder what they thought when they saw us?"

"… please make it more clear whether you are awake or asleep, Suzunashi-san."

"At the least, I'm awake now. Isn't that enough? Y'know, it's impossible to sleep here. Anyways, what do you think? Inoji. From a third-party perspective, I wonder how we look?"

"Who knows? Certainly not like Lupin III's company." I arbitrarily responded, as I could not figure out what Suzunashi-san was after. "What do you think, Suzunashi-san?"

"Me? For a moment, I thought of the Wizard of Oz."

"Wizard of Oz?" I tilted my head quizzically at the unexpected response. "What sort of story was that? If I remember correctly, the protagonist was Oz, right?"

"Wrong, Ii-chan. What do you mean *if I remember correctly*, you should fix that habit of yours, making stuff up while making it sound like you know anything about it," fired back Kunagisa from the

side, still staring at her pocket computer. “If the protagonist is Oz, the world would completely change. The protagonist was Dorothy.”

“But Ann is the protagonist of Ann of Green Gables, right? Tom is the protagonist of Tom Sawyer, right?”

“Your point of comparison is so off.”

“Then, what sort of story is it?

“Yup,” Kunagisa nodded. “Dorothy gets caught up in a tornado and gets flung into the Wonderful Kingdom of Oz, and travels with Mr. Scarecrow and Mr. Lion and Mr. Robot.”

“Momotaro?”

“The Wizard of Oz. Let’s listen to people, Ii-chan.”

“I am listening. So those four people… or well, three of them are not people, but anyways those four, go to defeat the Wizard of Oz. I see.”

“Not to defeat… Dorothy just goes to get her wish granted. *Please return me to my home*.”

“Mm. A pretty pacifistic story. Pacifistic, or foolhardy… hard to tell,’ I followed-up, while having a strange feeling about that story. “But even if Dorothy is alright with that, what are the other three for? Did they receive some dango?”

“The scarecrow and others had their own motives, too. Wishes they wanted granted by the wizard. For example, Mr. Lion *wanted courage*. Mr. Scarecrow *wanted brains*. It’s a story of them overcoming hardships for that.”

“Hard to tell if the story is about relying on your own strengths or relying on someone else…” I said and glanced at the rear seat. “So, what are we like that Dorothy group? Or rather, what sort of casting breakdown is it?”

“Dunno… just thought that for a moment, so don’t ask me. But hmm, casting… casting. Well, in any case I’d like the scarecrow. Because I want a smart brain,” Suzunashi-san said, still lying down. I thought it is manners to sit up when speaking, but Suzunashi-san has her own set of logic. “And, Inoji, you’re the robot.”

“The robot,” I looked at Kunagisa. “Tomo, what did Mr. Robot want from the wizard?”

Without any trace of anything, Kunagisa answered “a soul.” I looked toward Suzunashi-san again, and found that she was grinning this mischievous smile. I see, you just wanted to say that. There are some roundabout ways of scolding, I sighed, half-exasperated half-helpless.

“Ahh, but that’s that, you know,” said Kunagisa. “It’s a nice story because they think soul and brain are different. Like a fantasy.”

“Fantasy?”

“It’s fantasy. What other than fantasy would it be? Because the soul is a result of physical action by the brain, right? That’s why the field of artificial intelligence is possible.”

Kunagisa said, as if stating the obvious and known. Well, that probably was absolutely clear to Kunagisa. I simply agreed, “That is right,” as I did not feel in the mood to say anything.

While thinking that she might be like a little girl wanting to return home.

”…..”

If that is the case.

If that is the case, then who is the lion without courage, I wondered.

3

I parked the Fiat in the parking lot and pulled out the key. I looked at the remaining fuel symbol and thought it might be a dicey amount. Whether the car would last going down was questionable. At worst, we would have to borrow fuel from someone from the laboratory, but I wondered if they even had any. Looking around the parking lot, I could see no car other than Miiko-san’s Fiat. Perhaps there was an employee-specific parking lot, because worst case we would have to walk home, is what I thought, as I left the car.

I looked at the sky, which looked a bit suspicious. It was not that dark clouds were forming, but it still felt like tonight, or perhaps tomorrow, it would rain. It was like it was foreshadowing our future, and it was not comforting.

If you want to predict tomorrow’s weather, you just need to say “it’ll be something like today.” I forget who said that, but I see, it is quite apt. If that is the case, then I will be experiencing this research facility the same way as always. That premonition gave me goosebumps.

“Well then…”

According to the security guard, someone should be picking us up from the parking lot. I glanced around thinking that, and saw a silhouette toward the east. I could not make out their face from this

distance, but given that he was wearing a white lab coat, I assumed he was the research fellow that had come to pick us up. Then, he seemed to notice us, as he began walking toward us.

"Hello."

I raised my right hand, but he did not respond. Just silently, he walked toward us.

His height was roughly the same as mine, being neither particularly tall nor particularly short, like average. As the distance closed, I could tell that he was an inordinately young person. No matter how you looked at it, he was younger than me, like in the first half of his tens, at least his face looked that way. However, despite his youthful face there was a terrible unsuitable, dark look in his eyes beyond his glasses, which betrayed his childish looks. Of course, there exist in this world twenty-seven-year-old maids that look like they are middle school age or younger, so I could not determine age from his appearance.

Without lowering his pace, he continued to close our distance, and finally, *clattered* his feet still, standing right in front of my eyes and nose. In this case, right in front of my eyes and nose was not an exaggeration at all. He had come close enough so that if I leaned my body forward just a bit we would be touching. not only that, he was leaning his babyish face to within millimeters of my face. This was a distance such that if he were not a man, it would completely look like he were kissing me.

I stood maintaining status quo, not knowing what to do, when he seemed to sniff, as if smelling, twice, thrice, and then grumbled, "Hmph."

"So you're Kunagisa Tomo from *Cluster*."

Rather than calling it crass, his speech mannerism sounded like it was expressing disrespect. However, his voice was as young as his appearance, so I felt surprised, but did not feel that disturbed by it.

"No, I am not. I am just a tag-along, or rather, the commentator," I took a step back and created space between us before responding. "I guess an old-fashioned way of saying it would be a chauffeur."

"Ahh? What's that? I didn't hear about this. I didn't hear about such a thing coming along. Then where's Kunagisa Tomo, hey," as if looking for his fated enemy, he furrowed his brow and leaned toward me. "I don't see him, anywhere."

"In the shade of the car. See, there," I said, pointing at the blue-haired girl holding a pocket computer and various belongings, as she came out from the other side of the car. "That cute girl is

Kunagisa Tomo."

"Ahh? What's that? Kunagisa Tomo was a girl? You lying?"

He said with a sense of unexpectedness, and then he walked around the Fiat, and this time walked to Kunagisa. Kunagisa tilted her head at this new species of man's appearance, "Uni?" and he stared at her quite a bit, "Hmm," and finally even after having her blue hair slapped, did not show any signs of resisting. What a shockingly reckless fellow. This world has types of people whom have never even been slapped by their parents, although in that sense Kunagisa was the type who would not notice even if she were punched by her parents.

"Doesn't look very smart. Just a puny brat. Hey, are you really Kunagisa Tomo from *Cluster*?"

"Really. Boku-sama-chan's name is Kunagisa Tomo. Kunagisa Tomo no matter who looks at me. I came to see Sacchan."

"Ahh? Sacchan? Who the hell's that…"

Stupid, stupid, he spat, and he stuck his hands in the pockets of his lab coat, which seemed a bit too big for him, and began walking forward. He did not say to follow, but that was probably what was meant.

"Really, just a brat… a girl, with that title. Ahh, shit, the worst, the absolute worst. The worst filth."

"You look like a brat too though, Oogaki Shito-kun."[7)]

He froze.

He… Shito-kun completely stopped moving his legs. And then he froze in place for three seconds, and then turned around, "Why do you know my name?"

"Hmm? No, despite her looks, Kunagisa is nineteen, so I thought it was odd that you would be calling her a brat. You are correct that she is a girl, but compared to you, Kunagisa is not a brat."

"I'm not asking that, shit! *Despite her looks*? The fuck cares!" He stomped his foot on the ground. "I'm asking why you know my name! And my age! I don't remember telling those to you!"

"It is not as though your name is all we know," I raised both of my hands in a shrug. "About Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, about his secretary Uze Misachi-san, about the fellows Koutari Hinayoshi and Neo Furuara and Kasugai Kasuga, we know quite a bit."

"Ii-chan, you forgot one. Ii-chan you really forget stuff," Kunagisa said from beside me. "There're four researchers other than Professor and Sacchan, so you're missing one."

"Ahh… that is right. That was right. I was being forgetful," I nodded to Kunagisa. "Yes. And

Miyoshi Kokoromi-san. I think that would be all the people here, but Shito-kun, do you have any more questions?"

"… What are you? What are you two? How'd you find that stuff out?" he glared at us with suspicion, as if he meant to come biting as us depending on the way we answered. "**Those things** are supposed to be classified here. People like you shouldn't know. How'd you find that out?"

"Who knows. That is, after all, classified, so I am afraid I cannot tell you. However, I just want you to understand that it bothers me to deride Kunagisa Tomo based on her appearance alone, if–"

If you will please, Oogaki Shito-kun, I meant to finish, but I took a strong blow to the back of my head, so my line was forcibly stopped. I turned around, and saw Suzunashi-san standing there with her hand balled into a fist. And this time, as I had turned around, she flicked my forehead. It struck cleanly, and sort of hurt. Suzunashi-san, when did you step out of the car?

"What're you doing. Jeez, bragging about stuff that wasn't your doing," Suzunashi-san said as if she had just awakened, in an ill mood. "Is that fun? Teasing little kids. You disappoint me."

And then she struck my head lightly again, and then forced down my head. And then she turned to Shito-kun and said, "Our bad."

"He has a bad habit of getting all wound up when it comes to Kunagisa-chan. He's an idiot with bad intentions but please forgive him. He's apologetic, as you can see. And I'll scold him tonight, so please let this go for now."

Punched, flicked, and then I have to get scolded, too?

"….. Ahh… no, no, no," Shito-kun seemed to be taken aback by Suzunashi-san, who was forcing my head down, and did not know what to do. "No, it's, what, nothing to worry about…"

"That's good, all's well that ends well," Suzunashi-san finally let me go. "Then, please guide us to that laboratory or something. My whole body aches all over and it sucks. I'm Suzunashi Neon, the chaperon for these two. Pleased to meet you."

"… I'm Oogaki Shito. An assistant for Shadou Kyouichirou here… pleased to meet you."

He greeted Suzunashi-san in a daze, and then resumed walking. This time, for sure, we followed suit. It seemed we were to climb a mountain by using the woody path north of the parking lot. It did not seem like a difficult trail, but still it was not a flat path, so I carried Kunagisa's belongings for her.

When I lifted the bags with my shoulders I felt pain streak across the back of my head. Hmm, as would be expected of Blackout Suzunashi, she punched me without holding back at all. Perhaps the

back of my skull even has a crack. That said, I was without a doubt in the wrong with my attitude earlier, so I could not feel the will to complain.

And, it was as Suzunashi-san said. There was no need to get so heated up over Kunagisa being humiliated to that puny extent. I understood. And Kunagisa herself seemed to care not in the least. Even now, in a rare sight given how she was usually cooped up, Kunagisa was gazing around at the colorful trees lining the path, showing some level of enjoyment, so it did not seem she was bothered in the least. It made no sense for me to be the one to get angered over it.

"I guess I am narrow-minded at critical junctures… I lose."

In any case I decided to contemplate that. I turned to Kunagisa and said, "I was in the wrong." Kunagisa seemed not to know what I was apologizing about, cocking her head to the side, "Uni?" and even then that was just for a moment, as her soul seemed to have been ensnared by the trees. Suzunashi-san seemed to look at us with an expression of *golly gee*, and when I noticed her, she pulled the brim of her hat down to cover her eyes.

"Hey, you."

Suddenly.

Shito-kun called to me, walking roughly two meters ahead of us like a scout.

"Hey you, come here."

"I would prefer you stopped calling me you in such a manner… I am older than you, after all… nineteen."

"Shut up, that doesn't matter. Age doesn't matter **here**. It's not age, but purely who's smarter. And I'm smarter than you, so you should be respectful to me."

"….." Shito-kun's pretty simple, I thought, and I walked up to him. "What is it? Do you have a question?"

"Ahh, a question…" he whispered. "That big black one, is that a guy? Or a girl?"

"….." I glanced back at Suzunashi-san, then back at Shito-kun, and felt compelled to whisper, as I replied. "… Technically, a girl."

"I see. I was right. That's a relief." Shito-kun nodded. "Huge. How many centimeters does she have?"

"One-hundred eighty-nine centimeters. But she had not measured herself since she was sixteen, so she may be more now. But once you go past a hundred eighty-nine, height does not really

matter anymore. I wish she would share about ten with me."

"… wow. Jeez." Shito-kun seemed to genuinely admire her. "Did she used to play volleyball or basketball or something? Or does she have other ethnic blood? I don't think even foreigners get that tall that often."

"She says she is a pure Japanese… maybe it is because she has a blood-type of A?"

"… hah. … jeez, **you can't mistake that**. Not like that."

He then looked up at the sky, as if sighing.

Personally, Suzunashi-san has a slender form overall, so I did not think she was particularly masculine in her looks, but well, with that height and with that all-black appearance, and the hat pulled down over her eyes, it may be hard to discern her gender. Suzunashi-san's speech mannerism was rather feminine, but these days you cannot determine based on speech mannerism. I will not say who, but there do exist in this world women of extreme beauty that blare ridiculously vulgar phrases.

"That."

Shito-kun pointed ahead.

"The laboratory is beyond that wall."

"Huh…"

Beyond his finger, past the mountain trees, was a cold concrete wall that destroyed the scenic atmosphere. It seemed completely connected, like a circle, and like a mountain had been created around it. Even from this distance it seemed an abnormally tall wall, and it reminded you not of a first-class academic researcher, but of something else. Yes, if I were to verbalize it.

"Like a prison…"

"Prison? That's wrong. You've got no senses," Shito-kun said in a proud way. "That's a fortress. An unconquerable fortress. And that's like a castle wall."

"A castle wall, eh…"

Indeed, in this mountain with bad footing, this was terrain that would be difficult to attack. However, did that laboratory truly house something that required defenses to this degree? And, despite what Shito-kun might say, this place still looked like the wall of a prison. Not to reject intruders from outside, but rather to deny escape from within…

"Like a *Barrier of the End*… oh, by the way Shito-kun, I heard from the security guards that

yesterday or the day before, there was an intruder to this lab."

"Ahh. I heard something like that. I don't really know. I just saw his back from far away." he seemed to chuckle, with a malicious look. "But really, what an idiot. He ran off in the end without being able to steal anything. Don't take the security here lightly."

"But he intruded?"

"Intruded, I'll acknowledge that," he shrugged with a hmph. "But we don't allow anything beyond that. That's the sort of system this place has. Well, he probably gave up, and won't come back again. People who come in here bare-handed are nuts anyways."

"Bare-handed?"

Bit of an odd way of putting it, but I suppose since the *Intruder* came in through the security gate, they had undergone a body check of sorts, so that was to be expected. So as Shito-kun said, was that just an idiot, or perhaps the reverse and just an incredibly self-confident person, I wondered?

Self-confident, or knowledgeable.

"Ah? What is it?" Shito-kun ran over to me, as I had gone silently, with a suspicious look. "What are you? Why're you interested in that intruder? Are you some friend of that intruder?"

"Of course not. Why would such a convenient setting happen? Where do such cockamamie ideas come from?"

"I'm joking. What're you getting all riled up about, nineteen-year-old."

"My bad, sixteen-year-old."

It was a conversation that did not seem like one between a nineteen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old. Hmph, he went, and Shito-kun went back to silence. Perhaps he was thinking of what *cockamamie* meant. I was not comfortable with that part of English either, so I hoped he would not ask *what does that mean*.

However, Shito-kun seemed particularly venomous about the intruder (I suppose that is to be expected given that he is a victim), but given that the attempt ended in failure, then the intrusion into the laboratory was essentially pointless, I thought. If the intruder had not come in bare-handed, or perhaps–.

I placed a hand over my right chest. To be precise, I placed my hand on the breast pocket of the summer jacket I wore over a T-shirt, which had a thin knife hidden behind it, and I was placing my hand on it to confirm that it was still there.

It was not that I had lied to the security guard back at the gate. There is indeed a scissors in the left pocket of my jacket. Furthermore there is a can-opener in the backpack I am currently hoisting, and canned bear meat that Kunagisa loves so much. Anyways, as such, it was not that I said a lie. Because I do not remember saying that I did not have a knife. Yet however, in this case, I probably would not be able to avoid being labeled a liar.

This was a knife that a week ago, while I was preparing for this trip, an acquaintance contractor of mine had offered me. *An acquaintance contractor of mine* has a very dubious-sounding ring to it, but that is the truth, and so there is no helping it. It came with a holster, and by placing the holster under the jacket, it was designed such that people would not be able to tell that it is there, a simple design. Of course, it would still fail a body check, but I bet that the security guards would not perform such a thing on Kunagisa Tomo and her associates. That may have been a worse gamble than fifty-fifty, but in the end, it worked.

"It may not look it, but that knife has a really good edge, so try not to point it at people," said the contractor – Aikawa-san. "It'll cut like Black Jack's surgical knife – so use it when you're carving a wall or something."

Aikawa-san's worry was extremely helpful, however, this may simply be pouring water on lava. That intruder may be one thing, but for me to have a single knife (and, a scissors and a can-opener?) seemed somewhat pointless. At the very least, this one knife would probably not make it possible to break through that castle wall.

It would be like scratching your back with your jaw.

"Like bittersweet nonsense…"

In this case the term nonsense was not directed toward taking on that castle wall with a single knife. It was toward myself, who despite having boldly stood up to Kunagisa with the declaration that I *don't intend to be much of a help*, was actually fully intent on helping. Truly, it was as if I had nothing like a core belief. I may become exasperated with myself.

"Hey, Shito-kun."

"Hm? What?"

"Utsurigi… Gaisuke-san, what sort of fellow is he?"

"Utsurigii?" Shito-kun gave an expression of revulsion, as if he were shown the corpse of a cat. "Utsurigi?"

"Yes. Utsurigi Gaisuke-san."

"… A pervert." he spat, as he took two steps and turned his back to me. Or rather, he did not turn his back to me, but rather turned his face away. "A pervert. **he is** through and completely and from head to toe entirely a pervert. How else can you describe that bastard?"

And he stomped off, in an irritated mood. I could not bring myself to pursue the matter, and silently looked him off. If possible, I would have liked to acquire more objective information beforehand about Utsurigi Gaisuke, but hmm, it seemed it would be better to give up. At the very least it was worth learning that Shito-kun did not look fondly upon Utsurigi.

"….."

What I wanted to know was what that Utsurigi Gaisuke thought about Kunagisa Tomo.

The road had become a bit bumpier – or rather, the width of the path had become more narrow, so I stopped, and waited for Kunagisa. And as if I were pulling Kunagisa along by her hand, we continued on the path.

"I see… this is indeed a natural fortress. No, should I call it a castle. And an unmistakably terrible-mannered one, at that. It reminds me of things, though I would rather not."

"We might get lost going back if we don't remember the road. Ii-chan, be careful. Don't wander alone. Ii-chan's hippocampus is just sponge, after all. Uni, if you get lost in this mountain, really, unless you're Jun-chan you wouldn't get out alive. You'll get attacked by wild animals. So don't let go of boku-sama-chan. Ok?"

"I will remember that. I will remember that indeed. However, indeed truly, it seems like a bear or monkey may pop out."

"Inoji. By the way, is it true that monkeys evolved from pigs?"

"What are you talking about? Who told you that lie?"

"Asano. That a pig that escaped from a pig farm and became one with nature became a monkey. Incidentally Asano said she heard that from Inoji."

"Augh."

"Ii-chan you liar-. Neon-chan, actually, pigs were evolved from monkeys. It's the opposite. And actually I wouldn't call it evolve, but that humans made them monkeys to domesticate them. Like crucian carp and goldfish. That's why pigs are actually pretty strong. Because they used to be monkeys. Yup, one human versus one pig, the pig would probably win. They say there're anti-human weaponry pigs these days."

“Hmm. Manmade… Then can you manually turn a monkey into a human?”

“I don’t think you can…”

“Seems like making a human a monkey is pretty easy, though.”

“And Neon-chan, monkeys and humans are completely different lifeforms. They have similar ancestors, but it’s not like monkeys directly became people. If that were the case, the entire evolution tree would get flipped over.”

“Is that so. Hmm. You learn a lot being with Ao-chan. Really, you learn a lot. By the way, Inoji. It’s not also a lie that penguins are migratory birds that cross between the North Pole and South Pole around September, and that if you look toward the northern sky from Japan you can even see them flying, right?”

“I think there are lies that the fault lies with the deceived.”

“Hey shut up you guys, we’re here.”

Shito-kun said, and we looked in his direction, and found that we were already by the castle wall. The angle was rough so I had not previously seen it before, but when I looked at it from up close, I could sense that it was permeating an uncouth, uncomfortable beyond anything before sort of aura. It probably had not been long since it was built, as it did not seem that dirtied, in fact it seemed brand new, and that was so unnatural that it made me ill. Next to Shito-kun was an obviously steel, insulated door that seemed unnecessarily sturdily built. That seemed to be the way to enter.

Shito-kun opened that insulated door, and in a flourishing way, grinned proudly.

“Welcome, everyone. Welcome to the Mad Demon Shadou Kyouichirou’s Research Laboratory.”

[1)] From now on, I’m going to refer to destroyer as cracker. Nishio Ishin uses the word 破壊 (destroy) but uses the furigana “cracker,” and as is the case with every other instance of this, I’m running with the furigana. In this case these were the first and last times that the word destroy is actually read destroy, so this explanation was to explain why it goes from cracking to destroying back to cracking.

[2)] 兎(rabbit)吊(hanging, ie. hanging high school)木(tree) 垓(hundred quintillion)輔(vehicle radical is 車, it’s on the left of the letter). Incidentally some think his name Utsurigi comes from 移り気 (utsuriki), or “intent to transfer.”

[3)] いの字 (Inoji), one of his nicknames that he mentioned. Literally means “The letter I”

[4] Ao (Blue). Kunagisa's hair is blue.

[5] 美少女 (Bishoujo) = Beautiful young girl

[6] This being an idiom, so the "theif" is deliberate, meaning it's a slightly disguised version.

[7] Incidentally, "brat" is written "gaki," and his name is oo(big)gaki(brat).

斜道卿壱郎 ≪堕落三昧≫。
SHADO KYOICHIRO

一日目（2）——罰と罰

Day 1 (2)

Punishment and Punishment

0

Tenacity like a cockroach?

You mean they die if you whack them with a rolled-up newspaper?

1

The scientific laboratory of Mad Demon Shadou Kyouichirou – its official name was apparently the lengthy Shadou Kyouichirou Mathematical Theory Learning and Permutation ALS Research Institute – was constituted of a total of eight buildings.

Eight buildings were crowded together in a space surrounded by tall walls that could absolutely not be called spacious, so it would not be possible to deny that it looked cramped from above, but when you entered, it gave the neatly organized impression of a laboratory. It was not that I felt any bit of nostalgia, but the environment made me remember a little.

There were one, two, three - I could see four buildings that looked like dice once we stepped within the walls. Looked like dice, I expressed, but not because of the similarity in shape. Each building had not a single window, and so at first glance it was hard to determine if they were structures that could be called buildings. They resembled avant-garde art more than buildings. Speaking of which, I had heard of stories of industrial facilities that created things like game applications using window-less buildings for security, so perhaps this was the same case? If that were so, then once again I would have to say that they were taking a lot of precautions. Enough so that I could nod in understanding when they said that the *intruder* was unable to do anything.

Shito-kun continued walking forward, toward the largest building of the four, a building that looked like the General of the dice, then said “wait a moment,” pulled a keycard from his laboratory coat

pocket, and slid it through the card reader. He also typed a ten-digit code into the numpad placed next to the card reader. I thought the door would open then, but that was not the case.

"Please state your name."

There was apparently a small speaker above the card reader that was difficult to discern, and it sounded like an obviously synthesized voice. It was significantly more high-tech than the anachronistic gate security.

"Oogaki Shito. My ID is ikwe9f2ma444."

"Voice and retina confirmed. Please wait."

And after waiting a moment as directed by the synthesized voice, like an automatic door (if you were to complain that this expression is stating the obvious, then *like magic*), the thick, insulated door opened sideways. Shito-kun said, "hmph," stepped inside, and turned toward us.

"Hurry up and get in. It'll close soon."

I, Kunagisa, and Suzunashi-san entered as told. Inside was a white hallway reminiscent of a newly-built hospital. Shito-kun walked as a guide and spoke.

"This is the Primary Ward, so basically just think of it as the central laboratory ward that also doubles as Professor Kyouichirou's living quarters. I won't explain anymore because it's a pain in the ass. In any case, I'm taking you to greet the Professor, alright? Make sure not to be rude to him."

He was still as abusive as ever, but Shito-kun seemed to at least be responsible toward his own professional duties. He did it roughly, but he still guided us.

"The Professor is waiting on the fourth floor. Here, on the elevator," he said, and he pressed the button to call for the elevator. "Don't wander around like that, it's annoying."

"Well sorry. By the way, Shito-kun."

"What."

"Rather cautious. The entrance security, and the lack of windows."

Ahh, Shito-kun nodded.

"This is normal for a first-rate research facility. I guess I should go ahead and warn you guys not to leave the facility without letting us know. Once you get out yourself you can't get back in."

"Hmm…"

"Well, not that it matters."

We entered the elevator and moved to the fourth floor. I did not know how many floors this

building consisted of because there were no windows, but based on my instincts, I thought the fourth floor was the highest floor. We stepped out onto the hall, and Shito-kun pointed toward what looked like a smoke-break room and said, "Wait there."

"I'll go report to the Professor. I'll come back really quick, so don't relax too much."

Said Shito-kun, and then he ran off down the hall. In what world is there a host that directs their guests to "not make yourself at home too much while you rest, please," I thought as I sat down on the sofa in the smoke-break room. Kunagisa sat beside me, and Suzunashi-san sat across. Suzunashi-san took a cigarette out of a hidden pocket on her coat, held it between her lips and lit it with a Zippo.

"… Ahh, I can finally have a smoke," Suzunashi-san exhaled cigarette smoke with an ecstatic look. "Really, Asano… was so persistent about not smoking in the car."

"Of course, because the smell sticks. There is no helping what cannot be helped."

"Well, yeah… I was worried sick about this place being no-smoking, too, but it's all good. But you know, I was expecting something weirder, and of course the place and the walls are pretty weird, but the inside is pretty normal. Like the interior of a university."

"They are fundamentally similar things… However, it is still an extravagant thing, to be using such a large building alone." As someone who lived in an apartment room the size of a mere four and a half tatami, I was truly, honestly envious. "Ah, well… were there three using this building?"

"Yup," Kunagisa nodded. "Shito-kun and Misachi-chan and Professor, so three. The other Research Wards are one per ward, though."

"I see," I nodded. Really, my memory was as unreliable as ever. "Well, regardless, it is still an extravagant thing."

"I'm not just talking about the building," Suzunashi-san spun the cigarette around with her right fingertips as she continued, "The people seem pretty normal too. Normal people, should I say? I feel like I wasted some anxiety."

"Normal?" I tilted my head to the side. "Normal, Shito-kun? I do not think so… and to begin with, having a sixteen-year-old apprentice itself is abnormal for a normal research institute."

"I was imagining even stranger things, personally," Suzunashi-san laughed with a bit of embarrassment. "People that speak in programming language… people that fling mad and dead drugs at you… being naked under the laboratory coat… I was expecting that sort of stuff."

"You have quite the imagination…"

It seemed Suzunashi-san looked upon academics and researchers and scientists and other people of like ilk through rather colored glasses. Indeed, from such a perspective, Shito-kun would fall under a normal scope. Judging people after having preconceptions is not good, but I suppose in this case an incredibly crass prejudice actually led to an unexpectedly good result. Well, not that we were talking about such an educational thing.

"By the way, Tomo. I want to discuss something serious, now that we have come this far. What do you intend to do? Everything has gone smoothly so far, but you could also say this has simply been the phase where the application is started up, can you not? In any case, nothing caused a hang-up, so how do you intend to move the pieces now?"

"Uni. Unini. Uh, I've thought of some varieties," and Kunagisa leaned back and gazed at the ceiling. "Let's see. First I'll see the Professor, and have a chat. Put the problems on hold for now, and get permission to have a proper meeting."

"He is in the seventh ward, if I remember correctly?"

"Yup. And not to sound optimistic or anything, but I think we'll get permission to meet. And boku-sama-chan has a few wild cards ready."

"Wild card…"

I repeated her words, and then thought of a certain contractor, who had popped into my head from those words. The red contractor, mankind's strongest. She is a clump of self-confidence, who also certainly has even more than just her confidence, and you could express her as transcendent and superior: indeed, a wild card. She loves disguises and she loves manga, and she loves mischief even more, so that made her quite a bothersome personality to deal with, but there is no more dependable an ally.

"Tomo. Would it not have been easier to get Aikawa-san to help?"

"Hmm. But you need to take care of your own things yourself. It's not good to bother other people with things involving your friends."

"I think that is her job, though…"

As we were talking, as he had said, Shito-kun came back soon. "The professor will meet with you," he said, and hurried us up. That forced Suzunashi-san to press her half-finished cigarette into the tray, and she looked a bit wistful as she did so. Miiko-san had told me to "try to keep Suzunashi from getting too much nicotine," so I did not ask Shito-kun to "wait until Suzunashi-san finished smoking." Not that I think Shito-kun would have listened, anyways.

"This way. Hurry up."

Shito-kun said, and then he walked down the wide corridor, stopping before the door of the furthest room. He placed his hand on the doorknob, turned his head, and repeated, "Don't be rude."

"Especially you," he directed at me. "It's just my personal opinion, but you're weird. Don't say a word."

"You do not hold back from difficult subjects. I know… I do not intend to interfere. I understand my role."

I shrugged my shoulders as I responded, and looked at Kunagisa. Kunagisa did not show any signs of nervousness or anything. She had the same, usual, carefree expression. I would not say that she seemed to be enjoying it, but, it did not seem she cared about meeting the *Mad Demon*. Well of course, Kunagisa was actually wanting to meet none other than the one in the seventh research ward, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

I sighed.

"Right your posture. Well, then…" said Shito-kun. "Excuse us, professor."

And then the door opened.

We entered the room, Shito-kun leading. From the way the hall looked, I expected an interior like a hospital room, but it was nothing like, as it was like an ordinary visitor room with a round table in the middle. And on the other side of the table, he – Shadou Kyouichirou – sat.

They said he was sixty-three years of age, so I expected a more aged person, but my expectation was almost eerily off. While he did not have completely white hair, he had plenty of it, and showed no signs of balding. While his hair could not be called smooth, it still felt filled with vitality. I thought that his appearance was such that he could pass even if he were to say that he was in his fifties, no, even his forties. And more importantly, that gaze of his, that expression, was nothing like that of an old man. Not quite a researcher either, but rather a veteran, expert politician came to mind. Cunning, expert – such words popped up one after another.

Shadou Kyouichirou.

The room was filled with a presence dense enough to overwhelm and pressure.

"Fufu."

The old man laughed.

"It's been a while – seven years, I think? It's been seven years, I think, lady of Kunagisa."

A hoarse voice. However, that did not mean it lacked force. It was a settled voice, as if a superior person were calling out to an inferior person. If I am allowed to describe it in any way, I would say it was a voice that belonged to someone who stood atop others.

"You changed your hairstyle. That looks more like a child and suits you, lady of Kunagisa. You look more like a child than you did seven years ago."

"Why, thank you," replied Kunagisa to Shadou Kyouichirou's voice. "Thank you for praising me. I am quite pleased to have been welcomed so warmly, professor."

"Hah. You sound so sarcastic."

"Did I? I did not particularly mean to," Kunagisa shrugged. "But, if that is how it sounded, then I must have, after all."

One small lady stood behind the professor. She had a bob cut to her neck, and looked at us with a business-like gaze through her glasses – or if I were to describe it more, a cold, calculating look – and wore a suit. Considering that she did not wear a lab coat, she was probably not a researcher.

In that case, she must be Uze Misachi-san, the professor's secretary.

Shito-kun left our side and walked next to Misachi-san. He whispered something to Misachi-san, then did the same toward the professor. The professor nodded twice, thrice at Shito-kun's words, and then looked at us once again.

"Well then – kukuku, it has been seven years, after all," the professor turned to Kunagisa. "Of course, seven years is not particularly significant to me, but for the lady of Kunagisa, it's quite a few years, given that you're not yet twenty. There must be much for us to talk about, but unfortunately I do not have much time. I am busy, after all."

"Much to talk about? I do not think there is much to talk about with the professor. And we are both busy. You are busy of course, but I have work that I need to do, too."

"Is that so, is that so. That is a difference in perspective, lady of Kunagisa. In my world, we don't call things without industrial value work, but I suppose they do say that play is work for children."

"If play is work, then that goes for both of us. Having no industrial value goes for both of us. I suppose the professor is still playing with machine theory? If so, then thank you for your hard work. There is plenty of surplus and excess, after all. I wonder if you are not having too much trouble with the details?"

"You wouldn't know, lady of Kunagisa. You don't understand anything about me."

“Probably. I think so, too. The professor is right about that. I certainly do not understand.

Kunagisa nodded twice. There was nothing odd about that, per se, but that was why it left me with an odd feeling. I felt like this conversation was not quite right for the Kunagisa I know. Kunagisa would not participate in a **conversation that was not odd**.

“Artificial intelligence – or rather, artificial life, did you abandon that possibility? I heard that through the grapevine, professor.”

“I didn’t abandon it. I don’t abandon anything. I just realized that it was **easier** than I thought, so I’m taking a detour to solidify everything around it. I only want to make things with industrial value, after all,” the professor said with a self-effacing sneer. It was truly an expression that did not look like it came from any smidgen of comfort. “I don’t do anything as play. I’m not an artist doing things for performance. You shouldn’t harangue a scientist about the work they’ve poured their life and soul into, lady of Kunagisa.”

“Of course, I intend no such thing. Haranguing the professor about what he does? That would be pointless to the point of despair.”

Kunagisa shrugged her shoulders again.

That attitude, too, felt a bit off relative to the Kunagisa I know. I do not think I would be able to answer why it was different, however, an inexplicable sense of anxiety began bubbling forth from my heart. I understood that this was neither the time nor the place to fret about this though, so I shook my head and tossed such thoughts aside. I should think of someone like Hikari-san in these situations. Hikari-san was so cute. I wondered what she was doing, now.

“By the way, lady of Kunagisa,” Shadou Kyouichirou changed the subject. “Is your father doing well?”

”– Who knows?” Kunagisa seemed to hesitate a bit about responding. “You are malicious, professor. That question is malicious. You know, of course, that I have been disowned since **then**. You have been notified about it.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’m sorry, I have gotten old, after all. I tend to forget things,” laughed the professor heartily. “They say you don’t want to age, and they were right!”

“Hmm, I see. Then I assume research must be difficult to do.”

“No worries. I don’t need to be fret over by a child. Only my memory has waned. There’re plenty of media available to memorize things in my stead. As long as I can think, I’ll be able to satisfy your father, lady of Kunagisa.”

It was a very sarcastic way of speaking. It was a very distasteful way of speaking. I determined from the way he spoke that the professor definitely was not welcoming of Kunagisa as a guest. And on the other hand, Kunagisa also answered similarly, so not a single person would ever listen to this conversation and expect a friendly atmosphere.

Indeed. To Shadou Kyouichirou *Kunagisa Tomo* is a relatively insignificant existence. Even now, while he was acting like he was welcoming a guest, it was just for show. Just as Kunagisa valued Utsurigi Gaisuke, not Shadou Kyouichirou, Shadou Kyouichirou valued Kunagisa's father – or rather, in this case, Kunagisa's house, and not Kunagisa individually.

Kunagisa's house – the Kunagisa Syndicate does not need explanation. One of the few plutocratic households in Japan – no, it would be more correct to call it the ultimate role model of a plutocratic household. When considering relevant matters and affiliated jurisdictions, they encompassed over 22,200, no, realistically surpassing that number, companies. As long as you live a relatively normal life, they are so enormous that you would never realize you lived under their shadow, such was their size, and they had influence over the rest of the world. It was a bloodline that almost felt like that of a phantom.

And **that** also happened to be a patron of this laboratory.

For example, if you were to imagine something like the House of Medici it would fit this case perfectly, but in other words the Kunagisa household does not hold back in providing funding for this sort of personal research laboratory and similar artistic endeavors, for people with specialized skill sets – or rather, they are very aggressive in providing funding for such activity. Why Shadou Kyouichirou despite being labeled *Mad Demon* could without a doubt, even if it is deep in a mountain, have a very proper, unabashed laboratory, and continue research activities like this was because he had the backing of the Kunagisa household. Of course, the Kunagisa household was not providing this funding out of insanity or respect, nor out of kindness of heart, but rather because they wanted rights over the results and information produced by this laboratory, buying everything in advance, essentially to receive royalties and other such gains. Then it may be more accurate to call them not patrons but rather investors. Of course, it would be hard to find investors willing to invest in the *Mad Demon*, so in that sense the Kunagisa household could be called high rollers. However, that was the reason.

That was the reason that *Kunagisa Tomo and her acquaintances* were able to step foot within these facilities. Even if she were disowned, she was still a direct daughter of the primary bloodline within the Kunagisa house, so she could not be treated wrong. It was impossible for Shadou

Kyouichirou to turn down her request.

That was why you could say that this situation was formed by Kunagisa using authority as a shield to force her way in. If you think about it that way, the professor's malicious attitude, and Shito-kun's displeased attitude, all were understandable. We were the ones demanding the impossible.

"….."

Of course, that was if we were only to talk about the current situation.

"By the way, who's that boy?"

The professor suddenly changed his focus to me. He clearly thought me as suspicious and even pointed a finger at me.

"I thought the lady of Kunagisa would show up with her brother. I had always thought the lady of Kunagisa's agent would never be anyone other than her brother. That someone else in this world would be that insane absolutely shatters my world. Hmm? I don't recognize you. What famous person's kid are you? Or were you an engineer from the lady's school? Or perhaps you were someone from *Cluster*, even though you don't look the type?"

"No. Ii-chan is a friend," Kunagisa-said nonchalantly. "Nao-kun's the third-most busy body in the world, so he said he didn't have the time to come here. But, he said to give the professor his regards. *My sister may do something careless, but I will take full responsibility for everything so please rest easy*, he said."

"That's, well… Hahahah," the professor, for the first time, seemed to simply find that funny as he roared with laughter. "It seems he, too, is quite healthy. Kunagisa Nao, despite his circumstances, is still like that… Hmmhmm. I haven't felt this amused in a long time. Truly, a long time, lady of Kunagisa."

The old man seemed as pleased as a child, and then he changed his attitude and said, "Alright."

"Then let's have a serious chat. We're both probably at our limits. So–"

And then the professor looked at me again. I inwardly recoiled at his heavy gaze, but I did not show that in my expression. I probably succeeded, I think. However, my little success seemed not to matter any to the professor, as he continued speaking.

"Can we have your **friends** leave their seats? This is important, after all."

"… Are you talking about me?"

"Did you not take it that way? Young one," kuku, the old man chuckled. "You have good eyes,

young one. Really good eyes. About equal with our Shito-kun. Such good eyes."

Upon hearing those words, Shito-kun, who was standing by Misachi-san's side behind the professor, momentarily flashed a displeased expression. He seemed to glare at me, but it was but a moment, as he quickly recomposed himself, and looked away from me.

"However, this is a specialized topic. I don't think I'm asking anything wrong. So, will you leave your seat?"

"Well… but."

"Just listen to the professor, Inoji."

Suzunashi-san placed a hand on my shoulder from behind. I turned and looked at her, and found that Suzunashi-san was not looking at me, but rather directing her sharp gaze at the professor. She was grinning, as if she were enjoying the situation, but in this case this person's smile was a creation, and I knew that she instead used it as a poker face instead. When she was actually enjoying something, Suzunashi-san did not smile.

"Inoji's underaged, and Inoji's an outsider, and then on top of that not an expert, – so you shouldn't be sticking your neck into the difficult conversations of adults. Isn't that right? Doctor."

"… Indeed, that's the case, but," the professor looked at Suzunashi-san with caution. "Who're you?"

"My name is Suzunashi Neon. The repetition of a sound without a bell.[1)] I'm their guardian."

As she said that, Suzunashi-san pushed against Kunagisa's back, half-forcing her back in her seat, and then sat down next to her. No, it was not a style of sitting that could be expressed as *sitting down*. It was a very extravagant way of sitting, as if she were stepping on the chair with her waist, or as if she were expressing conquest and dominance over the chair.

She directed an audacious expression at the professor.

"Of course, since I am their guardian, I'll be sitting in on the conversation. But that's alright, isn't it? Doctor." She raised the ends of her lips, and formed an even more vicious look. "There're no problems. No problems at all, that would cause you to tremble in fear. No, no, actually there's nothing but good. After all, Kunagisa-chan is underaged, like Inoji. We can't have underaged kids negotiating with someone as glorious as the professor without a guardian. If you're a professor with academic prowess, a professor with esteem, and more than anything, a professor who's a friend of Kunagisa Tomo, then you must have thought about this, of course, so I can't imagine not being granted permission to sit here."

"….."

Violence Neon was never one to be counted out. None could stand up to her skill at playing the villain. Her physical stature also helped her become peerless in acting the villain. I could never pull something off like this, given how I lack an imposing physique.

The professor… laughed, pleasantly.

"Hahahah… indeed, that's true, Suzunashi-san," and he nodded several times as he spoke. "Indeed, you're right. You're correct… correct. Yes, I don't mind, you can sit in. You can sit in as much as you want. But we'll need that young one over there to kill time somewhere for about an hour somewhere."

"Yes. Sound good?" Suzunashi-san turned to me and winked. "That's alright, isn't it? Inoji."

"I will do that, then. Not that I have any choice," I raised my hands in acquiescence, and then said to Kunagisa. "Tomo. I'll be in the smoking room, then."

"Yup," Kunagisa turned to me and smile her innocent smile. "Understood, Ii-chan. I'll be there soon, so don't get lost."

Those words, that smile, all calmed me down.

Yup, that is the Kunagisa Tomo I know.

"Alright, then Shito-kun, let us wait outside."

"Alright, got it. I'll guide you around the area… wait, what!?" Shito-kun shouted. "Don't nonchalantly invite me like I'm a friend!"

I was joking, I said, and I left the rest to Suzunashi-san and stepped out of the visitor's room.

2

It is time for philosophy.

Well now, what sort of thing is a human soul in the first place? For example, someone, I think Freud, had separated the soul as the conscious and subconscious, but was there actually a need to separate them at all? Would I have any troubles if I were to have no subconscious aspect of the soul, or perhaps no conscious aspect of the soul, causing me to become an entity consisting entirely of my subconscious thoughts?

Kunagisa said the soul is a result of the physical activity of the brain. That is probably correct. I am not underestimating contemporary biological science to be able to completely refute that. However, if the concept of a soul is simply the brain acting as a monolith, if it is nothing but the electrical signals of neurons and synapses, then I can understand why some would argue that we are then no different from machines. Or rather, I feel like I fit in better with their perspective. However, even in that case, I would still find myself in more-or-less the same situation: *would I have any troubles if I were to realize that I am the same as a machine?*.

If you could explain everything about human action and human life using complete logic and organized programs, or alternatively if you could create a similar imitation to that, what is actually wrong with that? Just where is the reasoning for the application of the word *evil*? It is not necessitated that a chess player be human. No one would be bothered if the Tower of Hanoi had been routine construction performed by machines. Expressing a cluster of organic matter as a collection of inorganic matter is something to be praised and not something to be condemned. There are those that may say that it is a blasphemy toward God and a rebellion, but there is no reason behind declaring that the action of creating life is a unique privilege of God. After all, modifying a boar to become a pig, and creating replica or imitation life: how much of a difference is there?

If you want to look at things from a logical perspective, then the invention of the automobile would have been a similar affront.

Anyways, these days it has already become generally accepted that theoretically you can reconstruct a human soul using programs and applications. No, you could say that it has already mostly been done. Manmade life that you can hardly tell apart from just its appearance, or what has been called an android from previous times, are supposedly already mere seconds from being practical, or something. Nowadays there is very little that cannot be done through science, costs aside.

That is just how it is, I think.

For example, within my own brain thinking such frivolous things, you could say is just a pool of zeros and ones. As long as you have time, it is possible to express this in text using programming languages and machine language. What I want to say here is not whether that is good or bad, whether it is useless or boring, or anything of the sort.

What I want to say here is that, even though it is something that ultimately can be projected in text form, I could not explain why I was still indecisive like this. If it is text, then it should be simple. If you

were to look from a distant place, like a God looking down from their castle in the sky, then my thoughts are nothing but obvious nonsense. That is absolutely not an imagination wrought with romanticism, and absolutely not a fantastic illusion, but rather just a time-worn truth. Even then, that I am doing inexplicable, and meaningless, aimless, contradictory things all the time, could that be called a mistake by God when constructing humans, or simply a kludge program? Could it be that there was a failure from the start, that a block of code that was a mistake had been engraved into my brain?

If that were the case.

What is the point of copying such a program? What sort of meaning is there to my brain, which mass-produces that unseemly text? What exactly is expected by using, as the base, a device that in the end does not evolve or learn even a bit, by creating an application that is constantly misunderstanding, constantly mistaking, for two thousand, four thousand, six thousand years?

Even if such a thing were actually created, would it be the same as looking at yourself through a mirror? Would it not be a futile effort such as looking into the other side of the surface of the mirror, peeking into the other side of the surface of water? Not to conclude with finality, truly, it is – it is.

"Umm. It is… what?"

I thought about it for a while, but I could not come up with continuing words. I thought for another minute after that, but that did not go well, either. This may be the limit of today's user of nonsense. Jeez, and I abandoned the thought, leaned back against the sofa, and stared at the ceiling.

"Hmmm….. it is tough forcing yourself to think about something that seems serious."

Since I had gone through the effort of coming to a research laboratory like this, I thought of pondering something of the sort (artificial intelligence or artificial life, or something), but you really should not do things that you are not used to doing. At this rate, it did not seem I would be able to arrive at a sensible conclusion. Indeed, pondering should be done after you come to the conclusion first, I learned. The inductive method is not that easy.

The smoking room.

It had already been thirty minutes since I had been kicked out of the visitor's room. Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa, and of course Professor Kyouichirou and Shito-kun and Misachi-san, showed no signs of coming out of the room. At this rate, it seemed more time would be needed.

"An outsider, eh…"

I mumbled.

Well, that is how it is. I did not particularly think anything of it. Especially because I, myself, had no inclination of stepping in. I am used to being left out, and rationally, leaving Kunagisa to Suzunashi-san was the safest course of action. At the very least, it was clear that it is a better plan than having someone dangerous like me near her.

I understand.

I understand that.

I looked at the ash tray on the table in front of the sofa. A single cigarette, the one that Suzunashi-san had crushed on it, remained. It seemed like one with a heavy dose of tar. I knew of no other female who smoked something like this. Well, Suzunashi-san seemed the type to have strong lungs, and it was nothing that I should be fretting over. At the very least, that person was not one to die of lung cancer.

"… Come to think of it, Suzunashi-san was one of those people who cannot drink alcohol…"

I thought that being able to smoke but being unable to drink is rare, but upon further thought, those things have nothing to do with each other. One is the liver, and one is the lung - completely different internal organs. They are not issues to be lined up together. However, Suzunashi-san's friend, Miiko-san, was perfectly capable of drinking, but absolutely detested cigarette smoke, so I felt like there was some sort of relation, some sort of karma between the two extremes. Although, this sort of logic was warped to begin with.

"I am bored… maybe I will do a robot dance while imitating Miyamoto Musashi…"

Just as I had declared something that made no sense even to me, I suddenly heard the sound of what seemed like a running motor. That was slowly coming closer, and the sound was gradually becoming louder. It was like the sound of the Mini 4WD or remote-controlled cars that I had played with a long time ago, such was the cheap feel to the running motor, but, this sound, I wondered–

As I stood up from the sofa to look for the source of the sound, the source of the sound crashed into my right leg. It was a clump of steel roughly a quarter of my height. Or more specifically, it was like a cylindrical pillar made of steel, with wheels at its feet, along with something like a mob. It relentlessly crashed into my right foot, as I was still half-standing half-sitting.

"–?"

What is this?

Nothing that could describe this bizarre thing resided in my knowledge cabinet. **Ween ween**, it went, like a sound effect in a comic, and I could tell that it was some sort of machine, but I could not

determine its purpose.

In any case, I tried holding it down. And then, the mysterious object froze. When I decided to turn it around to the other direction, and then let go, that object, sounded its rumbling noise and ran off that way.

"…..? ….. What is that…..?"

"A cleaning robot."

When I saw off the Mysterious Object X with an odd feeling, this time from the other side came a human voice. I turned around, and about five meters down the hall, stood two people wearing the same type of lab coat as the professor and Shito-kun.

One had inordinately long hair, to around their waist. And it was not cleanly long, but rather like a monster that shows up in some book, crumpled and long, as if it had never been treated, had never been straightened. I could not tell their expression through the terrifyingly long hair, but I could see a thick mustache near the mouth that could barely be seen in between the hair, and so I noted that it was a man.

The other had radically different, cleanly-kept hair. However, only the hair was cleanly kept, as the figure was quite unruly. The lab coat looked constraining, and it was hard to say that they boasted a tight, healthy body. That said I could not say that it was an ugly form or anything, but rather, how should I say it, as if they were trying to keep an odd sort of tidiness, like a noble that appears in a foreign monochrome film.

It was not like Miiko-san and Suzunashi-san, but these two were also an extremely opposite pair, I thought, and as I walked toward them, I asked, "What is it?"

"Umm. Did you say something?"

"No no no, not really," the filled one said with an exaggerated wave of the hand. "You were looking at it with fascination. I just thought I'd be kind and tell you what it is. It's a cleaning robot. In other words, a maid robot for menial labor, hahah. No no, we shouldn't laugh, right? Oogaki-kun made it as play, after all."

Shito-kun made it, did he? That is pretty impressive, I thought, and I looked back down the hall, but that Mysterious Object X had already disappeared. It seemed it had already turned the corner.

"It's supposed to use radar and detection to pick up on the location of trash and dirt, and then automatically head that way… you know, our laboratory is pretty dry on funds, because someone spends money lavishly," and then the filled one glanced at the long-haired one with a bit of a

sarcastic look. “We don’t have enough leftovers to hire a cleaner, so Oogaki-kun took it on himself to make that, yup, well it’s actually pretty useful, but… yup, an admirable boy really, considering the times. It’s just. That robot, it’s a pain because it can’t tell the difference between people and trash.”

“That is no good.”

So that was why it was running into me earlier. I am the same level as trash.

“There’s no need to differentiate between people and trash,” a low, quiet, and dark voice came from the long-haired person. “There’s no need to differentiate, because they’re similar.”

If that had been said with the sarcasm of the filled one, I would have been able to respond, but given that it was said with an ordinary rhythm, there existed no way for me to respond. An agreement, like “yes, that is true,” would imply that I am acknowledging that I am no different than trash.

“Hah hahahah, this guy says some nasty things sometimes but don’t pay it any mind,” the filled one said with mirth, and then as if to nudge the long-haired one, continued. “Look, the boyfriend’s quite surprised. We’re in trouble if you displease him too much, you know?”

And then the filled one looked at me.

“After all, this one’s the lover of the niece of the famous Kunagisa household. The lover, hey? Love love, hey? They’ve got enough power to fling us worthless laboratory fellows with the flick of their finger, hey.”

”….. Umm.”

“My, apologies and excuse me. I hadn’t introduced myself yet,” the filled one grinned and exaggeratedly placed an arm over his chest as he bowed. “I am employed here as a fellow, and regardless of my will have been left with the care of the fifth ward, Neo Furuara.”

”….. I see.”

I vaguely nodded. I nodded, and thought, that if this person, this filled person is Neo-san, then the long-haired person. The long-haired person seemed to have noticed my look (I could not see his eyes through his hair, but it seemed he could see mine) and said,

“Koutari Hinayoshi.”

Frankly.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lover.”

“Huh…..” I answered once more with a vague nod.

Koutari was a name that was ordinary in Kyoto, but otherwise it was nationally known as the type of name that was *so rare that it was famous*. Perhaps Koutari-san came from Kyoto."

"Hello, well, pleased to meet you."

It was a pair of such extremes, and it was a pair with such different levels of bizarre impact, that I could not determine how excited I should make myself feel. I would need a high level of tension to keep up with Neo-san, but then it would be difficult to go along with Koutari-san. I felt sandwiched between high and low tension, but I began to feel it was pointless to worry over such a thing. There was no need to force myself to deal with these people. I said just "farewell," and then returned to the smoking room.

"Hey hey hey hey hey, don't be like that, don't be like that please, you make me lonely," said the filled one… I mean (come to think of it, that is a rude way of calling him) Neo-san followed, and then without consulting, sat down on the sofa across from me. "Bored, aren't you? Then let's have a chat, Mr. Famous."

"….. I am not particularly bored."

"Someone mumbling about weird stuff like brains and artificial intelligence and souls cannot not be bored," said Koutari-san quietly, as he sat down next to Neo-san. "Furthermore, I cannot imagine someone who thought about doing a robot dance while imitating Miyamoto Musashi is not bored."

"……."

Hmm. They had heard my painful monologue. It appeared they had been observing me for quite some time. It is a bad habit of mine to not notice my surroundings when I go deep in thought. Furthermore this is enemy territory (– it probably was alright to express this place as such), so letting down my guard is unacceptable. The only existence that could possibly let down their guard in such a place would be the red contractor. I decided to repent a bit.

Regardless, they came with none other than *Famous*. I had expected it to some extent, but just as we had borrowed *Chii-kun*'s powers to look them up, they had also investigated us. That would mean that Professor Kyouichirou acting like he had no idea who Suzunashi-san and I were and that he was expecting Nao-kun was just an act, after all.

If that were the case, then was Shito-kun not knowing about Suzunashi-san a means of reinforcing that disguise? Deceive your allies to deceive your enemies, they say, but hmm, I see, as should be expected of the *Mad Demon*, he is quite a veteran. I glanced at the visitor's room with a tiny bit of admiration. Deceiving your allies – is surprisingly difficult, you know.

”– So? Did the two of you have something to discuss?”

“Well. That puts us in a bit of a pickle, to ask that so directly, right? Koutari-san.”

”…….”

Koutari-san responded to Neo-san with complete silence.

“My my. This one’s cold, too. I feel lonely lonely,” however Neo-san showed no signs of being anything of the sort. His lips were curled in a self-satisfactory smile. Turning back to me once more, he said, “Then, alright. Shall I just speak to you?”

“About what?”

“What would you like to hear about?” smiled Neo-san with his meaty face. “I shall speak to you about anything you want. Any topic you want.”

”…….”

“Hmm? What? What is it? Are you being weary, being weary perhaps, maybe?”

“I am not being weary,” I answered calmly. “I have no reason to. I simply make it a point not to trust anyone who speaks a lot. People who smile with their face and disdain people with their soul are always scheming something. I am not fond of people who scheme.”

“How harsh, indeed,” and Neo-san slapped his own face. His motions were all quite flamboyant. You could even say he was overacting. “However, leaving trustworthiness aside, don’t you have anything you want to talk about? For example, about Utsurigi-san.”

”…….”

“Hm? What’s wrong? You want to hear, don’t you? About Utsurigi-san.”

Utsurigi Gaisuke.

I intended not to react, but it seemed my shoulders moved just a bit when I heard that name. And that was enough of an acknowledgement to Neo-san, as he loudly clapped his hands together and said, “Alright, gotcha.”

“That’s right. You all came to see Utsurigi-san, after all. Of course you’d want to hear about Utsurigi-san. Of course of course of course. You know, Utsurigi-san, he’s quite the talent. Or should I say, he’s quite outstanding? That person is…”

“A pervert.”

Koutari-san finished Neo-san’s line with decisiveness. I glanced at Koutari-san, or rather, I could not determine his expression because of his hair, but he did not seem any different than before, and

so there was no sense of him disparaging someone, but rather that he had said it matter-of-factly.

"Is a pervert. Without a doubt."

"….. I see."

I could only nod.

Speaking of which, Shito-kun had also said something like that about Utsurigi. However, there was a certain lack of tact for calling a colleague who lived in the same facility a *pervert*. Indeed, this may be an abnormal, far-out-of-the-ordinary place lorded by a person named *Mad Demon*, but for Utsurigi *Green Green Green* Gaisuke to be treated in such a way certainly made you wonder what sort of existence he is.

It was beginning to be far out of my realm of imagination.

"Pervert is quite cruel, Koutari-san. Pervert is too cruel no matter how you look at it. There's something called tact, you know," Neo-san whacked the unresponsive Koutari-san's shoulder. "He's quite odd, for sure. After all, he hasn't taken **a single step** out of the seventh ward since he's come here. You've gotta bow your head to that. Though, he's probably not an obsessive researcher like the professor–"

"He does not come out, you mean."

I thought of asking if that was a mistake for him being locked up, but I restrained myself. There is no meaning to debating with Neo-san here and now. To be honest, this sort of silver tongued, flamboyantly theatrical type of person is my worst enemy. It would be better even to have to take on a Yamitsuki somewhere.

"Yes yes, speaking of Utsurigi-san there was an interesting episode," clap, he struck his hands together in a theatrical act of just remembering. "It was about a half year ago. There was this two-headed monkey–"

"What are you talking about, Neo-san."

Neo-san's story ended abruptly again. This time the suspect was not Koutari-san but rather Shito-kun, with a scowl, who was standing over us and looking down. I could see Suzunashi-san behind Shito-kun. Then, because of her short stature I could not see her, but Kunagisa was probably behind him as well.

"Yo, Oogaki-kun."

Neo-san raised a hand in greeting with a grin, as if it were all deliberate.

"Thank you for your hard work."

"But no thanks to you at all, Neo-san," said Shito-kun with heavy emphasis, as if peeved. "What were you talking about? What were you just about to tell this thing?"

Thing, he called me.

"Nothing. Nothing important. Nothing important at all. I said absolutely nothing. I am a silent character, after all. All I did was greet him a bit, just a little bit. Right, Koutari-san? That's right, isn't it?"

"Don't ask me."

Koutari-san said shortly and coldly, and then stood from his seat. He passed by Shito-kun, and then walked down the hall toward the professor's visitor's room.

"Hey, hey. Really, what a bind. What am I supposed to do, jeez. Come on, wait," and then Neo-san also lifted his enormous body from the sofa, as if to follow Koutari-san. "Jeez… so impatient, Koutari-san. Ahh, well then, young man, that's all for now. I wander around the facility a lot, so we'll probably meet again. Let's have a chat then, this time for longer."

And then this time, as if ignoring Shito-kun, he bowed to Suzunashi-san and Kunagisa.

"Hello, hello, what beautiful ladies. Please make yourself at ease, welcome to the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou's research facility."

He lowered his head so much I wondered if it would touch the floor. Straightening back up and boldly chuckling, he turned to me and said, "Well, see you," and followed Koutari-san.

"….. Inoji. What's that?" Suzunashi-san said with utter curiosity. "It's been a long time since I've been called a beautiful lady."

"Boku-sama-chan too," Kunagisa looked exasperated as she watched Neo-san off. "Who is that? Ii-chan."

"Neo Furuara-san… the one with the long hair was Koutari-san. Koutari Hinayoshi-san."

However, he said *see you*. It was a way of talking that set a next meeting as a premise. He did seem the type that had a high encounter rate, but, in that case it seems an unnecessary flag was raised.

"Hmph," Shito-kun harrumphed in a despising way. "Such thoughtless people… to converse with this, to talk to this is a travesty for a fellow of this facility."

My. Am I being talked rudely about?

Ignoring Shito-kun, who continued muttering loud enough to hear, I asked Suzunashi-san behind him, “How did things go, I say?” Hmm, a bit of Neo-san’s flamboyancy had rubbed off on me. Perhaps the same had happened to Suzunashi-san, as she spread out her arms, as if to embrace me, and said “Positively!” with a theatrical motion.

“The details were a bit rough. But in any case, we were given permission to see Utsurigi Gaisuke immediately.”

“That’s how it is, Ii-chan,” Kunagisa said while swaying her blue hair. “Shito-chan’s going to guide us now.”

“Don’t call me Shito-chan!” shouted Shito-kun, cutting short his muttering and spinning to us. “You’re acting overly familiar! I don’t know what it is between you and the professor, but stop being friendly with me!”

“But if you think about it, Shito-chan feels more right,” I nodded in agreement. “As a nineteen-year-old, there is an obligation to call a sixteen-year-old person with a -chan.”

“There’s no such thing! Are you screwing with me? Are you screwing with me! Huh!?” Shito-kun shouted at us. “Cut it out! Or are you making fun of me in a roundabout way!?”

“I had no intention of being roundabout; however, this does seem to be set in stone now… I understand Shito-chan’s feelings, but it is not something that can be dealt with by me alone.”

“Shito-chan, if you don’t like it, I’ll call you Shitopi-chan.”

“Don’t! If you make fun of me one more time, I’m going to really be mad!”

“Understood, Shito-chan.”

“Roger that, Shito-chan.”

And then Suzunashi-san punched both Kunagisa and I.

3

What was unexpected was that when we were leaving the ward – in other words, when we were leaving the building, the card key, the code entry into the number lock, and the voice recognition and retinal recognition, were all required. To need to do this not only for entry but also for leaving was care and then care and then even more care, like a maximum security prison. Shito-kun said “Don’t

leave on your own," but it appeared that is an impossible task to begin with.

"The seventh ward is this way," Shito-kun said with his usual curt way of talking. "God – why do I have to guide them… this isn't part of my job at all."

Kunagisa Tomo and I walked a bit of a distance behind. Suzunashi-san said "I want to take a look around the building. Investigating, investigating," and was still wandering about the first ward. Suzunashi-san had quite a strong sense of curiosity, so there must have been things she wanted to take the opportunity to look at. She was being guided around by Misachi-san. Misachi-san was beautiful in her own right, but was not really a bishoujo, so it should hopefully be alright.

"In any case, Tomo," I spoke to Kunagisa as we walked beside each other. "What did you speak to professor Kyouichirou about? We were granted a meeting pretty quickly. I thought they would be hesitant about these things, and so the professor would try to procrastinate as much as possible."

"You're right. Yup, that's right. For boku-sama-chan it's technically technically expected, but this sort of expected is discomforting," Kunagisa said as she rubbed the back of her head, which had been smacked by Suzunashi-san. "He's probably confident."

"Confident?"

"Yup, confident with regards to Sacchan. Really, that sort of person… really, he must have really found out a lot, the professor. A lot happened so it's as expected as it was expected. Researcher – no, that's more the personality of an academic. Or rather, more a lifestyle than a personality, probably."

Kunagisa said with a bit of disappointment, as if she was saddened by the gradual loss of something. I did not know what to say to that Kunagisa, so I just averted my eyes from the awkwardness, and changed the subject. "By the way."

"How do they get electricity this deep into the mountains? Are there power lines? Even if there are waterways and gas. Even if there are phone lines."

"No idea. Hey, how is it, Shito-chan?"

Kunagisa called out to Shito-kun. Shito-kun had in turn apparently given up on that name, and while he looked unhappy, he said nothing about it, and simply snorted.

"**That's it**," and he pointed toward a building to our side. "Eighty-percent is generated from in-house. Research and experimentation and such take up a lot of electricity, so we do have a power line running to us, but we have to generate our own."

"Hmm. Then, this building–"

"The sixth ward."

"The interior of the sixth ward is composed of an electrical power plant. I was wondering because it was not a research building, but I see–," and then I looked up. With a glance, I noted that it looked like the first ward that we were in just now as well as the other buildings – no windows – but. "Do not tell me there is a nuclear power plant stuffed inside."

"We wouldn't make something that dangerous, idiot," Shito-kun struck down my worries in one blow. "It's a hydrogen power plant, hydrogen."

"What is a hydrogen power plant?"

"Powering electricity using hydrogen. Can't you figure from the name?"

It was an incredibly rough explanation, but Shito-kun did not seem like he was willing to give any further explanations, having turned back forward. We walked leisurely along the space between the greenery and the building that supposedly was a *hydrogen power plant*. It appeared Utsurigi Gaisuke's seventh ward was on the other side of this sixth ward. Given its numeric order, the seventh ward was probably created last.

"However, the buildings are all placed close to each other," I mumbled to neither Kunagisa nor Shito-kun as I recalled the blueprint of the laboratory wards. "Isn't that dangerous in the case of earthquakes and fires?"

"Unyun," Kunagisa looked at the first ward and then the sixth ward, and nodded. "Yup. There're problems for dealing with earthquakes and such. But because it's in the mountains, there're other architectural restrictions. Of course, this is just hearsay from Nao-kun. But even so, isn't this still better than Tokyo?"

"Well, that is right, but. Come to think of it, have you even been to Tokyo, have you even seen that place?"

"Ii-chan hasn't either."

"But I have been to Houston."

"That's not a brag at all."

It was not.

I spontaneously decided to look at the sky and noticed that it had become cloudier. It was still just evening, but not a single ray of light made it through, or rather it had become as dark as night. It was like raven-colored clouds had dominated the heavens in a ghastly way.

– Then.

Bump, Kunagisa ran into my back.

“Auh, sorry, Ii-chan.”

“No, do not worry,” I stepped aside, letting Kunagisa pass. “I was spaced out, too. I was looking at the sky.”

“Yup? Ah, you’re right. Looks like bad weather. Like it’ll rain. Hey, Shito-chan?”

”….. What.” Shito-kun said back, a line that should be a question but lacked a question mark. “Did you call me.”

“Yup. How high up are we? It looks like we’re lower than the cloud.”

“Don’t ask me,” Shito-kun sighed. Not that I could speak for others, but despite being young, his sigh implied many years of hardship. “Why would I know something like that?”

“Even though you live here?”

“Then do you know the altitude of where you live?”

Uni, Kunagisa folded her arms. Shito-kun sighed once more and then plodded forward. Yes, it seemed Shito-kun had come to realize that Kunagisa is a rather difficult person to deal with. Becoming angry at Kunagisa is just a waste of effort.

“What’s wrong, Ii-chan? Let’s go.”

“Ahh. Yeah.”

I nodded, and I subtly glanced behind us, and followed Kunagisa. Only trees were left behind us, and I could not see anyone.

”…….”

Of course, I did not bump into Kunagisa because I was looking up at the sky. I am not refined enough to look at rainclouds with any sort of passion. Even if I were to look at rainclouds, I would only think, “Ahh, it is cloudy. Quite cloudy indeed.” No, the reason why I suddenly stopped was because I sensed something unpleasant behind. *Something unpleasant* only comes across as vague, so allow me to rephrase that with more specificity.

I felt something watching us from behind.

I do not know for sure if it was someone watching, but in any case I felt *we were being watched*, or *someone was tracking us*. Of course, just as I had not noticed Koutari-san and Neo-san approaching in the first ward, I am not particularly sensitive to such things. Not sensitive, but it did not

mean I am especially insensitive. I have enough senses such that if I do feel it, then I can determine whether I felt it for sure.

However, who could it be? The first to come to mind were professor Kyouichirou or a subordinate fellow (for instance, Koutari-san or Neo-san from earlier), or perhaps the professor's secretary Misachi-san, but none of that really fit. A sufficient beholder named Shito-kun stood right in front of my eyes. There was no meaning to go to through the pain of double-checking.

"….. Tomo. Have you done anything evil lately?"

"I haven't. Recently, at all," Kunagisa responded quizzically. "What? What do you mean with that? If I did something evil, is Ii-chan going to scold me? Sounds exciting."

"No, if you have not, then it is fine."

Indeed, Kunagisa had barricaded herself in Shirosaki's house of late, and had been pouring herself into something suspicious, but I had not heard of her actually doing anything. Even if there were problems related to that *something suspicious*, I could not imagine it was something that would merit being stalked this deep in the mountains.

Perhaps it was an animal or something, I tried to steer my thoughts toward realism. I felt like it was simply a favorable interpretation, but I also felt like it was the only reasonable answer. This place was completely surrounded by a high wall, so even if it were to be animal it would have to be a bird, so that would mean that I had at least come to the point where I could sense the eyes of birds. That would indeed to be quite a level up in skill, but I also felt like it was a very superhuman power.

"It is nonsense akin to placing the price tag by its side…"

It was sufficient for a scarlet contractor to be the only one with such a skill.

Following Shito-kun's lead, we walked past the sixth ward and turned a corner to see the seventh ward. As expected, just like the other buildings, it was a windowless, dice-shaped building. It seemed slightly smaller than the power-plant sixth ward. Although from where I stood, the height seemed similar.

"….. Hmm–"

So he is inside – the cracker for *Team*, *Green Green Green* Utsurigi Gaisuke.

For some reason Kunagisa held my hand. I glanced at her and noticed that it seemed that, like me, she was pondering something, as she looked up at the laboratory. I did not know why she grabbed my hand, but in any case, I held her hand back.

“What’re you two daydreaming for?” Shito-kun said with suspicion. “Jeez. Didn’t you two come to see Utsurigi-san? Hurry up and come.”

Shito-kun had already arrived at the entrance. He was standing in front of the card reader and tapping his feet with irritation with a hand to his waist. I continued holding Kunagisa’s hand and moved us toward him.

“Let me tell you now… I have nothing to do with whatever happens. Absolutely positively nothing. Really, no matter what happens, I’m not going in to help.”

“Help? What?” I tilted my head to the side at Shito-kun’s words. “I do not really understand what you mean, Shito-chan.”

“You two are so persistent… I’m gonna tell that black big sister,” Shito-kun looked at us with an unforgiving look. “Jeez… why am I always stuck in this sort of role… so cruel, really. Well, whatever. Anyways, no matter what Utsurigi-san does, I’m not coming to help. Just understand that real good.”

“What do you mean by help, Shito-kun,” I asked again. “It is not like we are coming to see Dr. Lecter, right? Are you saying Utsurigi Gaisuke is going to bite off our tongue?”

”……”

I said that as a joke, but Shito-kun muttered, “Correct, Mr. Columbo, and then slid the card through the reader. He entered the code number, and then, “Oogaki Shito. ID is ikwe9f2ma444.”

The thick, heavy door slowly opened. Shito-kun entered first, followed by me and then Kunagisa. Shito-kun muttered, “Jeez… really, so unexpected… ugh ugh,” and continued down the hall.

“Fourth floor.”

He said quickly, and then he opened the steel door at the far end of the corridor, and began climbing the stairs by its side.

“Do you not have elevators? I thought there was one next door.”

“Doesn’t like them. Utsurigi-san. Elevators,” Shito-kun answered without turning around. “So almost everything from the elevator shaft to the box is completely decomposed. He **let off** using hardly any tools.”

”……”

I glanced at Kunagisa, but she only mumbled nostalgically, “Sacchan is still the same.” It seemed that was not a light joke or anything. I see, *destroyer* and *pervert*. I felt like I was able to see a bit of Utsurigi Gaisuke.

We arrived on the fourth floor. After completing the climb, another key was used to open the door, and we stepped into a white hall. If the central hub of professor Kyouichirou's first ward gave the impression of a hospital, this one gave the impression of a university campus. That came because it did not seem like an atmosphere befitting human life. There was a lack of realism, as if we were inside a theme park.

Shito-kun did not hesitate in selecting a door, and then he stopped. He waited for us to arrive, and then seemed to gather his wits before knocking.

"……"

There was no answer. Shito-kun furrowed his brows with suspicion and knocked again. However, there was still no answer. It remained silent.

"….. That's weird. The professor called him."

"Maybe he is sleeping?"

"Idiot. He received a call, why would he sleep after that," Shito-kun looked at me with exasperation, and then knocked once more. "….. That's weird….."

He knocked a third time and a fourth time, then he finally seemed to give up, and then he sighed, and placed his hand on the knob. And then he said, "It's Oogaki. I'm coming in, Utsurigi-san," and then pulled the door open.

There was no one inside the room.

Shito-kun entered the room, so we did the same. And then, I was surprised by the interior of the room. It was not just that there was no one inside. There was just a single, steel-piped chair in the middle of the room, and there was not one other thing, without any exaggeration or hyperbole, absolutely nothing else in the room. It was like a newly-built mansion room that no one had yet stepped into – yes, a very inhuman atmosphere.

"Shito-kun," I said to Shito-kun. "What room is this?"

"Ah? Utsurigi-san's private room. He's usually here when he's not working, but…"

Private? What about this room was a private room? If such a thing exists, it would not be this place in the least. Without any reason, I walked around this spacious room, which had nothing, and was about the size of twenty tatami.

"Hmm. So this is Sacchan's room…" Kunagisa followed suit. "Hmm. Indeed… indeed… indeed– ufufu."

She seemed satisfied. Was this supposed to also be just as expected of Utsurigi? More and more the term *pervert* seemed more real. No, if this is supposed to be individuality, then I thought that it should instead be expressed as an illness.

Shito-kun was just irritated. He glanced around the room without any purpose, and then began hitting the wall in a furor. Perhaps the walls were sound-proofed, as all that came of it was a powerless slapping sound.

"Shit… did he run away…"

Just as Shito-kun muttered that.

"I haven't run."

From the entrance came a voice. That voice was oddly pointed and shrill, like a hen.

"Would you please refrain from saying rude, incorrect things, Shito-kun? Even if it's rude, I do not mind you mouthing the truth. Even if it's wrong, I will forgive if you speak with respect. But both are unforgivable. Altogether unforgivable, Shito-kun. Or are you saying that there is a reason that I would run away?"

Shito-kun turned, and then I turned, and then Kunagisa turned.

There was one lab-coated man, leaning against the inner frame of the door.

What stood out most was the white hair that did not suit his age. His slender form and long limbs. He looked the part, yet because of that, the lab coat felt lacking for him. He wore white, cotton gloves on each hand. He had a pretty face such that one might glance at him and think him a girl, but his stubble on the end of his chin struck that thought down. And then his orange-colored sunglasses, and the eyes behind them. Those eyes were smiling and laughing, but the back of those eyes were not laughing.

This is. This is.

"U– U U U," Shito-kun's words became stuck in his throat as he said the name. "….. U, Utsurigi-san….."

"Yes, it is Utsurigi-san," Utsurigi flashed a manly smile. "Utsurigi Gaisuke."

"Ah, um….."

Shito-kun seemed to take a step back and turned toward Utsurigi. It was like a rodent was being terrified in front of a carnivore, would be a metaphorical expression of his sudden shift in attitude. Shito-kun was completely cowering in front of Utsurigi, such that you would never think this was the

same person who was just now cursing while punching the wall.

Cowering.

Yes, this was absolutely not a display of respect or awe. Shito-kun's emotion was unfortunately understandable for me. I could understand it like it was my own feeling. My emotion standing in front of Utsurigi, my impression having first met Utsurigi Gaisuke, was probably completely the same as emotion of Shito-kun at this very moment.

However, Utsurigi Gaisuke himself did not so much as glance at Shito-kun – or even, of course, me – looking instead in one fixed direction. There is no need to explain what direction that was. None other than one blue-haired girl stood in that direction, with her jaw raised as she looked up at Utsurigi with her eyes.

Utsurigi adjusted his sunglasses, and then curled the right corner of his lip, and then,

"– Yo, *Dead Blue*."

He said, and then he lowered his head deeply.

That sight was so bizarre it was memorable, as an adult man was bowing to a young girl.

"This would be about two years. Would it not. Oh, did you change your hairstyle? You've become much cuter. What happened to that coat? That precious, precious keepsake. Fufu, whatever the case, to be able to see you once again, is both extremely awing and moving to myself."

"To be precise, one year and eight months thirteen days fourteen hours thirty-two minutes and fifteen-point-seven seconds. Of course, seventeen-point-eighty-seven seconds have passed since our reunion. Yup, right – I am glad we were able to meet again."

Replied the one who used to lead him.

"It's truly been a while, *Green Green Green*."

[1)] Suzunashi (鈴無音音) is written repetition (2x) of a sound (音) without (無) a bell(鈴).

一日目（3）——青い檻

Day 1 (3)

Blue Cage

0

Hard work always creates something.

Not that it will necessarily connect to results.

1

“That Kunagisa brat…..” Shito–kun said to me, as if he were speaking to himself. ”….. What in the world is she? What in the world kind of person is she?”

“Hmm?” It took me a bit of time to determine that those words were intended for me, and I responded one tempo late. ”….. Not a brat - she is nineteen after all.”

”….. I see.”

Normally he would have snapped something back there, but Shito-kun simply nodded powerlessly.

The smoking room on the fourth floor of the seventh ward. Shito-kun and I were sitting across from each other. Neither of us could be considered smokers, but we were just killing time. That said, time kills itself like this, so the expression may be off. It may be better to rephrase it as us clinging to time in order to prevent time from being killed. The theory is completely wrong, but as a phrase, it was not bad for describing this situation.

I glanced down the hall. I focused my eyes on one of the doors lining the wall, as if I were peeking through to the other side. Of course, it was quite the distance, and I did not possess powers of clairvoyance like a fortune-teller on some island, so there was no way I could see what was taking place on the other side. That *Dead Blue* and *Green Green Green* were having some sort of conversation.

What they were talking about I could not fathom. I had no clue.

"….. Utsurigi Gaisuke….."

I mumbled with a low, heavy voice.

His age was probably around thirty. I could not determine whether that white hair was dyed or natural, but his age was probably around that. He had a bit of a light, free-spirited air around him, but that was enough for me to understand that he was not ordinary. One glance was enough for me to understand that he was a person on the other side of a thick, long line somewhere.

Like a red contractor, like a blue savant.

"Hey, listen. Listen, you," Shito-kun said with a bit more strength this time. "That Kunagisa, what in the world is she? I'm asking, so tell me."

"….. Why do you think I would know?"

"Of course you do. You're her lover, aren't you?" Shito-kun said, leaning closer. Shito-kun said, leaning closer. "Someone who can talk to that Utsurigi-san on equal terms, someone who can talk to that Utsurigi-san on equal footing – it's the first time I've seen it happen. No one here – not even the professor – can do that. That's why, even though they're both ex-members of *Cluster*…"

"That is not quite right," I fired a correcting arrow. "Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke were not members. In terms of ranking, Kunagisa had a higher class. She was the leader of *Team*, after all."

"….. Really?"

"Really. Well, I still only half-believe it though. No, thirty-percent-believe it, I think," I shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Totally, certainly like nonsense."

"I can't believe it," said Shito-kun, as he leaned back into the sofa. And then, "Then… what in the world is she?" he asked for the third time.

"Why do you think I would know?" I answered again. "Do you think I would know that? Shito-kun."

"….. You don't know?"

I did not answer. I changed my answer to confirm that with no answer.

Indeed, I do not know. I do not know that Kunagisa Tomo. That Kunagisa Tomo, who spoke with Utsurigi Gaisuke on equal terms. That Kunagisa Tomo, who was called an eerie, dangerous-sounding alias, *Dead Blue*. Relative to **that**, I could say that I would know more about a person I was meeting for the first time. In that case, I would at least be able to determine that I was speaking to a person.

When it comes to *Dead Blue* – I would not be so sure.

"……"

Who had I been watching this whole time?

No, wrong, that is not the problem. Rather, what had I been watching this whole time? If there is anything to be called nonsense, this would be it. Calling this a misunderstanding would be a joke. Until now, despite being by her side, how much had I missed? No, was there really any point, any instant at all that I had truly, actually been by her side? The way that Utsurigi had once been, to truly be by Kunagisa's side – would I ever be able to do that?

I understood.

The identity of the emotion that I had felt toward Utsurigi, or rather, to the members of *Team*. It was not an emotion as first-class as jealousy or admiration or aspiration. It was a feeling of inferiority that reached repulsive levels when it came to myself. It was an irritating level of despair at my own self. It was a depressing level of disappointment at my own self.

"Hey, you okay?"

Shito-kun's call snapped me out of it. I looked up, and found Shito-kun looking at me with a worried expression. Hn, I shook my head, and answered, "I am alright."

"It is nothing."

"You sure? You looked really sad, you know."

I must have had an incredibly mournful expression to have incurred the worry of this Shito-kun. It must surely have been wretched. I could not imagine it myself, but that must have been the case. This feeling of betrayal certainly felt like it would cause such a look.

"Betrayal… truly, the worst… I am."

I muttered, and shook my head once more. I then slapped my cheeks with both hands, and recomposed myself. Alright. I shall fret and worry a bit later. For now, for now still, let me be swept along as the situation wants to sweep me. Consciously or subconsciously, that is all that I can do for Kunagisa.

"So, Shito-kun – why are you here?"

"Ah? What's that?" Shito-kun asked back with doubt. "Whaddaya mean. Why I'm here?"

"You do not need to answer if you do not want to. I just figured I'd ask to break the awkward silence. I just thought it was odd that you would be here so young."

"So young, eh. Is that some sort of sarcasm?"

Shito-kun went silent for a bit. I did not say anything either, not expecting a response, but eventually Shito-kun opened his mouth and said, "I like that professor."

"That professor – you mean Professor Shadou Kyouichirou?"

"Of course. *Mad Demon* or what have you, he's an amazing person. I don't know what's up with that Kunagisa, but you're the same, aren't you?" Shito-kun asked me. "You're with her because you like her, yeah?"

"Like or dislike… does that not seem a childish notion, Shito-kun?" I slowly shook my head. "It is not that simple. It is just not that simple. If it were, it would make so much more sense."

"…"

"No, perhaps it is that simple? Maybe it is actually simpler. So simple that I do not know, complex and intricate because it is so simple and obvious – may be what it is. She happened to be in front of me, and I happened to be in front of her – it might be something as simple as having the timing fit. You know, like a digital clock. You just spontaneously look and find the numbers all lined up, just fundamentally being like that, and there is no reason whatsoever to it – that sort of thing."

"I don't really get it."

"Probably. Along with what I do not know, I would like to clarify a misunderstanding with Shito-kun. I am not her lover. I do not know why, but it seems people have misunderstood. It is not something like that – she is a friend, a friend."

"Huh? Aren't you two too friendly to be friends? Boy and girl, too."

"There is no such thing as being too friendly for friends. And gender is irrelevant for friendship… In any case, I do not know how she feels about being called such a thing, but personally I do not find it very pleasant. Shito-kun, you would find it unpleasant to be called professor Kyouichirou's lover, right?"

Shito-kun folded his arms.

"….. I would."

"Of course you would. And that is how it is. At the very least, it is against my style to have the thought process of wanting to tie everything into romance," I held out both hands. "And someone else is my lover."

"Really. What sort?"

“A high school girl who attends a super elite ojousama school. She is a first-year, so she is fifteen? Her name is Saijou Tamamo, and she likes glittery things, and is a pretty cute tomboy-ish girl. I am pretty lovesick with her [1]. We go out to eat ice cream together a lot. She makes me pay all the time. She eats the cream, and I just get the cone. Well, thus is the weakness of being in love.”

“….. Sounds like a made-up story.”

“That would be because about half of it is made up.”

“Hah. You’re a con artist.”

“And you are a mochi maker.”

“Yeah, yeah. Every New Years we knead it like so and so, and then hammer it and hammer it [2] – why!” Shito-kun shouted. “Why am I playing the straightman for you in a place like this!?”

“Well, I was actually not expecting a straightman…”

It was fun making fun of Shito-kun.

However, it appeared Shito-kun did not find it so amusing, as he looked displeased, saying, “Cut it out, jeez.”

“Not that you would– hmm. Speaking of which, what’s your name? You haven’t told me yet. You were the only one who didn’t introduce yourself back then.”

Hmm? I tilted my head to the side. Given what Neo-san had said, it was clear that professor Kyouichirou had investigated us already, so I had assumed that it was probable that they also knew my name, but perhaps they had not dug deep enough? Or perhaps they had assumed I was just an extra for Kunagisa Tomo and thus had not bothered finding out. Ah, no, that is wrong. Regardless of whether they knew my name or not, Shito-kun must have been told to *guide Kunagisa Tomo and her associates*, so he must not have been informed. Shito-kun had expressed great admiration for the professor earlier, but would he still feel the same if he were to find out how he was actually viewed? As an ally that had been deceived for the purpose of deceiving the enemy?

“…”

Well, he probably could. The explanation made sufficient sense, after all.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Do you not have a name?”

“Well… Hmm. My name is Spooky E.”

“….. Uh huh.”

I had braced myself with some level of expectation, but this time, Shito-kun did not play the

straightman. Rather, he seemed to respond coldly to it.

"….. Um, so you're wanting to say that because it's *E* you're called *Ii-chan* – that supposed to be the punchline?"

"Correctly so, rightly so."

"……"

"Idachi Ikuyo would suffice."

"……"

Shito-kun seemed to have given up on something with me, and after turning away and sighing deeply, returned to the original subject, "Not that you would–"

"Not that you would understand why I'm here, even if I were to explain the reason. Of course you can't, you can't possibly get it."

"Right. No one likes being told that other people know how they feel. ….. Speaking of which, this April, I met a fortune-teller who knows everything about other peoples' thoughts."

"Ah? Another one of your lies."

"This is more nonsense than a lie, though. Though I cannot go into details. In any case, it is a person from whom Shito-kun and anyone else would be unable to hide a single thing."

"Basically, a master of psychology?"

A very logical interpretation. I nodded, "That is one way to look at it."

"Shito-kun, what do you think? About those things."

"What do I think? Of course I hate that crap," Shito-kun tilted his head at my question, looking like he did not understand. "Having your thoughts out in the open all the time, at the very least, wouldn't be pleasant. It's just like you said."

"No, I did not mean that… Not our side, but how do you think they feel? Knowing everything that other people are thinking."

"Pretty convenient, isn't it?"

"… Convenient. ….. Perhaps."

I nodded at Shito-kun's answer, which came without any hesitation whatsoever. But if that fortune-teller were to hear that, we would have received some sort of retort.

Ahh, come to think of it.

Even with that fortune-teller's ability to read minds, Kunagisa Tomo's mind could not be read. One could theorize that the reason that Kunagisa Tomo's mind could not be read was because it was far too deep. Her brain was processing so much more than a normal person that it would be incredibly difficult to decipher what was going on inside.

And just then, Mysterious Object X passed by the side of our smoking room – no, I know of its identity now, so the janitor maid robot passed by. This time, the steel cylinder did not mistake people as trash, and instead sped right down the hall. I see, that robot is stationed at every research ward.

"So you were the one who made that janitor maid robot, Shito-kun?"

"Ah?" Shito-kun furrowed his brows. "Well, yeah, right. But where'd you hear that?"

"Neo-san."

"–That bastard," Shito-kun clicked his tongue in irritation. "Freakin' loose lips."

"Calling a senior a bastard is quite wrong. But that is still admirable. Making a maid robot is truly amazing. Yes, I prefer an old type of maid, but I do not think that sort of new type is bad."

"Stop calling it a maid robot. Only Neo-san says that crap."

Without any semblance of pride or joy, Shito-kun said, "That's nothing," as if being praised for such a trivial thing was more annoying than anything else.

"Even elementary schoolers can build something like that as long as they have the parts and tools."

"Indeed. That would be the difference with the older type of maids."

I nodded in agreement, but I actually prefer the older type of maids.

"….. Hey, Shito-kun. One more question about maids."

"What?"

"I heard Utsurigi-san does not leave this place, but is that true?"

"Leaving the question of how that relates to maids at all aside…" Shito-kun asked back with suspicion. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Umm. This was from Neo-san too."

"….." Shito-kun froze in place with his posture. "……. Shit. That bastard."

"I said calling a senior a bastard is quite wrong."

"That bastard is that bastard. He's a guy, so he's a bastard. I'm doing nothing wrong. And if you want to go by seniority, I've got seniority on Neo-san. I've been here longer. Neo-san's the newest

one here, after all… Yeah. So what's up? Utsurigi-san hasn't taken a single step out of here – is that a problem for you?"

"No, that is not what I meant….." I absent-mindedly ignored his rambling. "But indeed, this place is filled with quirky people. Utsurigi-san, of course, but it is hard to call you ordinary as well, and professor Kyouichirou and Koutari-san and Neo-san and Dr. Kokoromi. Truly a collection of intellectuals, a random pounding of talented people. *Mad Demon* seems to not refer solely to professor Kyouichirou."

"I'm ordinary. Don't be subtly rude. …. Hmm? Hey you, you've met not just Koutari-san and Neo-san, but also Miyoshi-san?"

"Ah, no not like that. I just know of Miyoshi Kokoromi-san through rumors. She has quite a colorful trail of human dissection and biological dissection, so even I know of her."

"Really, now. Well, that person is pretty famous… and she did work where she worked before she came here, so I guess it's not that odd that you'd know of her. Anyways, I'm ordinary. Not just me, everyone's ordinary. We may look odd from the perspective of a commoner like you, but that's just a problem with your level of comprehension."

"Hmm… that may be the case. That probably is the case."

I nodded, but it was questionable as to whether Utsurigi was part of that *everyone*. However, I decided not to pursue that matter. If I were to pursue it, then naturally, Kunagisa would become part of that conversation, and I did not have confidence that I could remain calm if that happened.

"A problem with my level of comprehension…"

Is that the case? That may be the case. That may not be the case. However, probably, it is the case. Such is how these things are. In the end, the problem comes back to me. Despite the level of depth, it becomes a simple, logical matter. It was like Murphy's Law.

According to which, all difficult equations boil down to an answer of either zero or one.

"Zero, eh…"

Then, I heard the creaking sound of a hinge. I turned my head toward that direction, and saw Kunagisa stepping out of the room. She closed the door behind her, swiveled her head about, and froze completely when our eyes met.

"Ah, Ii-chan, discovered!"

Kunagisa said, and then she ran over. Just when you might have thought she'd arrived at the

smoking room at full speed, she showed no signs of slowing her pace. In fact, she seemed to accelerate, and then jumped at me. I was used to this sort of behavior though, and skillfully reducing her impact while ensuring that neither of us would be hurt, I caught her.

"Heheeeh," Kunagisa seemed to giggle as she wrapped her arms around my back, embracing me. "I'm home, Ii-chan."

I hesitated for a moment, and then responded, "Welcome home, Tomo."

We were as natural as we had always been.

For now, this was sufficient. Alright, I thought.

Think of it as alright.

"….. Thanks for that sight, but," Shito-kun groaned with displeasure. "If we're done here, let's get back. Go flirt somewhere else. I was told to bring you two back to the Professor when the meeting is done."

"You seem more like a grunt than an assistant."

"Shut up! I'll kill you!" he said irritably (not that I fault his anger). Standing up abruptly, he sauntered off. I tried to follow after him, but Kunagisa would not let go, so all I could do was stand up.

"Hey, Tomo. I will let you hug me all you want later, so let go for now."

"Umm. Sure, but," Kunagisa said, as she surprisingly quickly let go. And then she turned to Shito-kun. "Shito-chan, wait a second."

"Ah? Why do I hafta wait? Are you going to hug me too?"

"As if. Um, Sacchan…" Kunagisa gave me a side-ward glance. And then she looked back at Shito-kun. "Wants to talk to Ii-chan."

"Ah? What?" "Ah? What?"

Shito-kun's doubt-filled voice and my surprised voice were almost completely in harmony. Shito-kun's voice would be the bass and my voice the tenor. However, a short duet of two men was not particularly pleasant to hear. Shito-kun and I ended up steeped in an awkward silence, and so in an effort to get away from that, I turned to Kunagisa and asked again, "What?"

"I said Sacchan wants to talk to Ii-chan."

"Is that so?"

"Why!?" Shito-kun shouted. No, more like yelled. "Why would Utsurigi-san want to talk to this guy?"

"This time it is *this guy*… should you not get a scolding from Suzunashi-san?" I sighed, jeez. "But I agree with that opinion. Tomo, why did Utsurigi say he wanted to talk to me?"

"I dunno," Kunagisa answered indifferently. "Anyways, when boku-sama-chan was leaving the room, Sacchan said, *Can you ask the boy whose eyes were like those of a dead fish to come in? I would like to speak to him, just the two of us*."

"All he said was *the boy whose eyes were like those of a dead fish*, right? Then maybe he was talking about Shito-kun."

"Of course not." "Of course not."

This time it was the duet of a soprano and a bass.

"It's obviously you." "It's obviously Ii-chan."

"Of course." "Of course."

A hymn started. I did not understand what was going on. I said, "Well, that aside," and forcibly interrupted the hymn.

"Let us leave what my eyes are like aside, for now. Why was I called by Utsurigi?"

"I said, I don't know. Don't ask boku-sama-chan. You'll find out when you go, right?" said Kunagisa, pointing at the door she just came through. "Go ahead and take the chance to talk to him, Ii-chan. It'll probably be fun. Boku-sama-chan will wait here."

And then Kunagisa plopped herself down on the sofa. Shito-kun came back down the hall and did the same, muttering, "What's going on, jeez."

"You two really can't be helped. Well, be off with you then. I'll be waiting here, too."

"You could go back, you know."

"And I said that if I did, you two wouldn't be able to get out. Why do you think I'm stuck here without anything else to do?" Shito-kun slapped the table. "Hey, hurry up and go."

"Alright… I understand."

Anyways, it seemed I had no choice but to go. I do not know why Utsurigi called for me, but I did not seem to have any other option. I did not really want to, but it seemed I had to. I whispered to Kunagisa, "Be careful, and shout if anything happens," outside of earshot of Shito-kun, walked across the hall, and stopped in front of the door.

I turned around to face Kunagisa.

"Hey!"

I shouted.

“Tomo, was it fun, talking to Utsurigi?”

“It was fun.”

It was a simple answer. Truly, a truly Kunagisa Tomo-like answer. However, right now, currently, I lacked an understanding of that *-like*. What did it mean to be Kunagisa Tomo-like? Something that simple had become very vague. I no longer knew. It was like a deteriorating copy had begun seeping through to the back of the sheet.

My thoughts regarding Kunagisa, and Kunagisa’s thoughts regarding me.

Perhaps this is the decisive moment for me to anchor my foot. At the very least, the Kunagisa Tomo who was sitting right next to Shito-kun over there should be the Kunagisa Tomo I know, I thought as I knocked on the door and pulled it open.

“Yo – nice to meet you.”

And.

I had not even entered when I was greeted by that high tone. It was a voice that could fool anyone into believing that it came from a woman, like a forced falsetto, the sort of voice that could absolutely not be called mellow, like the sound of a sharpened blade.

I entered the room, closing the door behind me. And then I said the same, “Nice to meet you.” And Utsurigi smiled, a warm laugh.

He was sitting on the steel-piped chair, the one and only piece of furnishing for the room. His legs were crossed, he had adopted a completely relaxed posture, and he was facing me. His chin was raised just a bit, as if he were looking down upon me, and he peered at my expression.

No words came forth. Toward Utsurigi, not a single word came to mind.

”–I wish you would not tighten up so much.” Utsurigi was the one to eventually speak. “You were like that before when we had a glimpse of each other, you know. Why do you look at me like a sworn enemy? It’s been quite some time since I’ve spoken to a human like this. I’m pretty sure I haven’t done anything to you yet, hey? You know, Shito-kun is the way he is, so he won’t speak to me or look at me or even come close to me whenever we cross paths, and the others never come this way. Despite appearances, I love company very much. I’m a purely lonely. So lonely, so lonely that it cannot be helped. That’s why, if you will, please, say something?”

“Quite some time?”

I tilted my head to the side at that. At the same time, I felt some of my nervousness dissipate. At the very least, he seemed like someone who I could converse with. I moved a bit while maintaining a set distance from Utsurigi, and leaned against the wall to the right. I turned toward Utsurigi once more.

"What are you talking about? Were you not just speaking to Kunagisa?"

"With *Dead Blue*? Woah there," Utsurigi chuckled. It was a terribly human-like action, which I suppose is obvious, but because it was obvious, I felt a terrible sense of misplacement. "Oh, please. I don't know what to say to that. Shouldn't you know that best? Or are you saying that *Dead Blue* – Kunagisa Tomo is a human being?"

"….."

"Communicating with **that** is an impossible task for anyone. Impossible for me as well as you as well as anyone else. Is that not right?"

While he seemed to want agreement and his eyes appeared to be laughing, as expected, I did not sense even a bit of lightheartedness behind those eyes. It was like he was waiting to pounce on any opening I gave, such was his expression. I care-freely responded, "I do not think so."

"More importantly, Utsurigi-san."

"Utsurigi suffices. Also, why don't you take a seat, instead of standing there?"

"On the floor?"

"It's cleaned often, so it's not dirty. Of course, it wasn't I that cleaned it, but rather the machine that Shito-kun made."

"I will stand."

Is that so, Utsurigi nodded.

I shifted even more of my weight toward the wall, and lessened the burden on my left leg. It was so that I could run at any moment. Although I felt such a need would not arise, there was no merit to being unprepared.

"Utsurigi-san, did you have something you wished to speak to me about?"

"I said Utsurigi would suffice, didn't I?" Utsurigi's shoulders trembled. "I hate being suffixed with -*san*. There is no reason for you to be calling me such, and I would like to say the same to Shito-kun. Truly, a bothersome thing. Those in *Cluster* always called me without any formalities, and that was the most natural."

"… what do you mean by Cluster?" I could not help but ask. "I have heard that name several times since we had come… is it a different name for *Team*?"

"I think a different name lacks accuracy," Utsurigi raised his index finger. "We had no name in the first place. So we all just called it what we wished. I generally called it *Cluster*. That has simply become the normal means of referring to it here. Well, I made it normal. If I remember correctly, *Cheetah* called it *Mates*. *Reverse Cross (Night-travel Crime)* called it *Russell (Gathering of Paradox)*[3]. And *Double Flip (Double-layered World)* even made a nice pun for it, *Inside (Within the Territory)*. It wasn't just irony or something, **that** enjoyed playing with words. And then, and then…, heheh, well, everyone did what they wanted the way they wanted. There were some that changed the way they referred to themselves every time, so we had no real name or different name or true name or anything. I called us *Cluster (Flock)*, that's all. –And then *Dead Blue* called it *Team (Comrades)*."

Team.

That word sucked air out of my lungs.

"Woah, you tightened up again just now, right when you were finally beginning to loosen up. Did something I say strike a nerve? If so, I apologize. I'm not blessed with the opportunity to speak to others much, so I'm not very learned in the arts of politeness. Please don't take it the wrong way."

"No, I do not mind. I do not mind at all. More importantly, Utsurigi-san."

"I said to call me without the honorifics… Whatever. I don't expect for all of my wants to be accepted. Continue; what is it?"

"What did you speak to Kunagisa about?"

Utsurigi fell silent for just a moment after hearing my question, and then said, "You."

"You call her *Kunagisa*?"

"… Answer my question, please."

"I'll answer if you answer, let's go with even negotiations. My question first, what do you normally call *Dead Blue*? Just the way I once called ourselves *Cluster*, what do you call her?"

"….."

"Incidentally, this Utsurigi Gaisuke uses *Dead Blue* when speaking to her directly. Sometimes that's also the case when speaking to a third party, but if I speak to that third party and reference her, it becomes *Kunagisa Tomo*. I sometimes abbreviate it to *Verge* when referring to her as an abstract

entity. Very rarely, I say *that*. That would be the four I use."

I did not understand the point behind his question, so I hesitated a little. However, no matter how you took it, it did not seem like a question that had an ulterior motive. Then, perhaps, it was just simple curiosity. I decided to answer honestly.

"When I speak to her directly, I call her by her first name, *Tomo*. If I am trying to get her attention, *hey, you*. When speaking about her with someone else, I use her surname *Kunagisa*, and when referring to her, *her*. The only exception is when I speak to Nao-san… Kunagisa's older brother, if I refer to her I say *your sister*. He dislikes having her name spoken aloud."

"You speak as if you were narrating for someone else. No, nothing wrong with that. Your past is essentially someone else, after all."

So said Utsurigi, as he repeated to himself, "Hmm, *Tomo*, *Kunagisa*, *hey, you*, *her*, *your sister*…"

"I see… so that's the kind of person you are. Understood understood, I get it."

"Was it some sort of psychological test?" I had regained a bit of composure, and naturally asked with a comparative voice. "So? What sort of twisted emotion do I have with regards to Kunagisa?"

"That may be better left unsaid. No, ignorance is bliss, perhaps," Utsurigi said without any shyness. "Still, you are quite gloomy. Despite those dead-fish eyes of yours."

"Saying they are like dead fish is a bit much. The Professor said *good eyes*."

"Good eyes they are. Truly impressive levels of rotting. When I speak to you like this, it reminds me of *Cheetah*."

Utsurigi grinned, clearly enjoying himself. Whether that meant he purely enjoyed speaking to me, or whether that meant he enjoyed observing me, or whether that meant he was only acting like he enjoyed himself while he did not enjoy himself in the slightest, I could not tell.

"… I answered, so please answer my question. Utsurigi-san. What did you speak to Kunagisa about?"

"You can imagine, can't you? What do you think we talked about?"

"….."

"Ah, sorry, sorry. It's alright, I'm not Socrates. Although they do say my nose looks like his. However, returning a question with a question to make the other think is, well it's not bad but it's not my style. I'm more the talkative type, the type that says everything myself."

"Is that so."

"Yes. *Dead Blue* said, of course – ***I'll get you out of here***."

Utsurigi said that with some pride. As if being told that by Kunagisa was the greatest of his achievements.

"… and, what did you say?"

"Rejected. Of course?" Utsurigi said, as if was truly obvious. "We spoke about other things, but those were private, so I'd prefer you understand that. You wouldn't want to know about how I deal with my sexual urges, right?"

I wonder. No, I do not.

"Why did you reject it?"

"I waved my hand like this and said *No, no, it's fine*. … Don't look at me like that. Do you not get jokes? You don't need to look at me out of the corner of your eye every time like that. I'm not sitting in a corner, you know."

Whether he found his own pun amusing or for a different reason I did not know, but Utsurigi chuckled. It was an infantile sight, belying the age behind his whitened hair.

"Let's alternate questions, then. It's my turn, isn't it? Let's make sure we're both in agreement about the order."

"….. Then, go ahead." I nodded, half-carelessly. "But, do you actually have more to ask me?"

"Yes. Plenty."

He had plenty.

"Then how about we start with a jab….., have you kissed Kunagisa Tomo?"

"……"

I truly felt like I wanted to walk away.

"Incidentally, I never have."

Of course. If you were to have done that to a minor at your age, it would be a crime with no room to say excuses. Not so much a social crime, but more a crime as a person.

"So, how about you?"

"….. I have," this time, I really, truly carelessly answered. "So?"

"No, I just felt envious. Continue."

"Continue what. It is my turn to ask a question, is it not?" I raised my face a bit, staring at the

smiling face of Utsurigi. "Why did you reject her? Do you not want to leave this place?"

"An odd question, from both you and *Dead Blue*," Utsurigi suddenly sounded bored. "You two are both saying a terribly bizarre thing. I was invited here as a fellow, you know? I get paid wages, and I'm living a pretty comfortable life. It's not like I'm imprisoned here or held captive or anything."

"….. the academic achievements that Professor Shadou Kyouichirou has attained, the results of scientific research that he had presented to the Kunagisa House **as his own reputable work**, I hear that close to ninety-percent of that was actually **the work of Utsurigi Gaisuke**."

"Who knows? I don't know what you're talking about. I've never heard anything like that. Isn't that just a trick?" chuckled Utsurigi. "There's a lot of gossip in the world about taking credit for others' work, after all."

"If you are not imprisoned, then, Utsurigi-san, then of course you have a means of leaving this research facility – no, even this seventh ward?" I persisted. "For example, do you have a laboratory ID card that goes into the card readers? Do you have your voice and retina stored in the lock database?"

"……"

Utsurigi went silent. And then, with a scrutinizing, squinting look, he stared at me. I deliberately, half-forcibly ignored that, and continued speaking.

"Have you ever left this place? I have heard otherwise. ….. Despite offering your entire spec to Professor Kyouichirou, despite having your freedom completely suppressed, do you still feel the lack of a need to leave this place?"

"You talk big, **young one**." Utsurigi closed both of his eyes. Opening his right eye, he continued, "You talk about freedom at your age? At the age of nineteen, you talk largely about something like freedom? How very crass."

"….. According to Kunagisa… no, to be more precise, according to Chii-kun, but my understanding of you is that Professor Kyouichirou has **some sort of blackmail** on you to restrain you here…"

"Hahah! *Blackmail*!" Utsurigi clapped his hands loudly in front of him. The dry sound echoed around the room. "*Blackmail* is good! That's an awesome way to put it, coming from that *Cheetah*. Laughable. Too funny. I've never heard something so funny."

"….. Answer my question, Utsurigi-san."

"Hahah, heheheh. Answer your question? Alright. I'll answer, young one," Utsurigi stopped his

dry laugh and slowly raised his head. “For example… do you know of the life-form, pig? Or a cow or a chicken would suffice.”

“Of course I know about a pig.”

“That’s great. Then of course you know that a pig was an animal created by domesticating monkeys? Cows and chickens were not really configured as a species like that, but they’re pretty similar nonetheless, being domesticated. Domesticated. What do you think about that? They – yes, I’ll call them *they* deliberately – can you say that they, as living beings, have succumbed to humanity?”

”….. Is that wrong?”

“Wrong. Not just wrong, it’s the opposite. As a result, as a result of being domesticated, as a result of being configured, they became even stronger. Protected by humans, raised by humans, produced by humans, their market share among the world’s animal populace exploded. By living with humans – no, by forming a **parasitic bond** with humans, they acquired an immovable position in the hierarchy of species. Is that wrong?”

”– it only sounds like sophism.”

“Sophism is still a form of logic. Similar to how potatoes and sweet potatoes are both potatoes. Now, is my current situation really as bad as you think? I’ve been given an entire research ward like this, and I can speak to you like this. You say I’m restrained but that’s the case no matter where I go. Is there any life in this world that isn’t restrained? In the end, to me, watching TV every day and only speaking to a certain set of people every day, while being able to move about, is still being restrained in a certain amount of space. I feel much freer than people like that. At the very least, my mind is a lot freer.”

“I cannot think you are being serious.”

“It’s your **freedom** to think what you may. I have no intent of **restraining** your opinions.”

Utsurigi inhaled after those words, and continued, “Now it’s my turn to ask a question.”

“Have you slept with Kunagisa Tomo?”

”……. Am I going to keep being sexually harassed like this?”

“Who cares? Let’s just sit down, man up, and speak our minds like men,” Utsurigi made a perverted face. “Incidentally, I’ve never slept with *Dead Blue*.”

“If you have, it would be a crime,” I raised both of my hands. “I have not, either.”

"You haven't?" he seemed taken aback. "What? Wait, no way. You must be lying."

"It is true. I would not lie about something like that. And I have never gone even close… well, I will not say that at least, but in general we have never crossed that line," I wondered why I was being this open, but I continued answering. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Not at all. Quite dissatisfied. That can't be right," Utsurigi crossed his arms and groaned. "You're a straight man, aren't you? You don't have strange fetishes, right? Or are you actually lusting for me, right now?"

No, I'm not.

I ignored Utsurigi and took my turn.

"In other words, Utsurigi-san, you have no intention of leaving this place?"

"That's not what I meant. I don't intend to not leave this place, but I have no reason to leave this place. For example, I hear *Dead Blue* just lives like a hikikomori in her Kyoto mansion. Would you force her to get out? Of course you wouldn't, would you? There's no reason for her to step outside. It troubles no one. I'm the same. There's no reason to go out into space just to learn that space is spacious, is there?"

"In other words, Kunagisa's actions this time were nothing but a bother to Utsurigi-san?"

"Hey, hey, you don't need to be that aggressive with your tone," Utsurigi slightly raised his right shoulder, as if recoiling in horror. "Not at all, of course. I am genuinely pleased by Kunagisa Tomo's feelings. You could even say that I am moved. And, even otherwise, being able to reunite with *Dead Blue* makes me happy. In that sense I'm quite appreciative of you, for having acted with Kunagisa Tomo. Thank you."

"….. You're welcome."

A sigh. It seemed he was right about being talkative. No matter what angle I tried to attack him from, he would always scatter my vector and ultimately swallow everything up into his own pace.

He only looked like a strange old man, but he was one of Kunagisa Tomo's Team. I would not be allowed to forget that.

"Now, my turn. Does that mean that Kunagisa Tomo, to you, is not someone you can view as a woman, and that while she is an object of affection, she is not an object of love?"

Oh. This time he asked a relatively normal question.

"In other words, you don't lust for Kunagisa Tomo's loli body."

”……”

I was a fool for thinking otherwise.

“Incidentally, I do. … I was joking, so please don’t run away. Don’t try to leave. Of course I wouldn’t lust, I’m fifteen years older than her, you know? Of course I wouldn’t do such a thing. Where I was raised, calling someone a lolicon is just a way of greeting someone. It’s true. If you’re recoiling from something like that, you wouldn’t be able to survive where I grew up, you know? Please, stop shooting me that suspicious look.”

”…” I sighed.

I swore that no matter what, I would never go to this guy’s birthplace, and wondered if this was the reason why Shito-kun and Koutari-san referred to him as a *pervert*. In that case, Shito-kun’s fear was understandable. Subtly, I re-positioned myself so that my hand would easily be able to pull out the knife in my right breast-pocket.

“You kiss Kunagisa Tomo. Embrace. Yet perhaps that is just a level of skinship that you might share with your sister. So one might say that Kunagisa Tomo is like a sister to you? That’s not bad at all. They do say that being considered a little sister is in a way the greatest praise that can be heaped upon a lady.”

”…..”

“Incidentally, I have two little sisters–”

“I do not want to hear it,” I immediately interrupted. “And normally, in Japan, people do not kiss their sisters. They also do not embrace.”

“What? Seriously?” Utsurigi seemed honestly surprised, as he adjusted his glasses. ”– is that the case. Wow, I learned something, today. Thank you. I’m glad I met you.”

”…” I sighed. It was not appreciation I enjoyed. “In any case, Kunagisa is not my sister. At the very least, I have never thought such a thing. She may be an existence as close to me as family, but that is an issue of distance.”

“Hmm. Your expression seems to hint that you don’t care about family. Hmmhmm. I’m beginning to understand. The problem.”

“Problem? What entirely was he seeing as a problem of what? This man named Utsurigi was the only problem, for now. I was beginning to feel like I would rather end this conversation and retreat to my room.

That I did not could probably be attributed to Utsurigi having been part of Kunagisa's *Team*. No, I should not say that in past tense, for they still consider each other comrades, and it was because of that, that I stood here continuing to converse. I analyzed myself.

"Then–," I continued my words. And then I took a look around this empty room. "– why, do you call this room with nothing your private room?"

"Woah. You're changing your angle? I see, a plan to get me to let down my guard. Yes, not bad, not bad. That's a sharp way to do things. You have such a cute face, but you're quite vicious. You seem to be a person with more intelligence than you look," Utsurigi was filled with mirth. "The answer is simple. I dislike when things are messy. In truth – I would rather get rid of this chair, as well, but if I go there I would have to be considered slightly ill."

"I think you are plenty ill as it is."

"No, don't worry. The other rooms are pretty messy. There are some rooms that aren't messy, but at the very least, they're not orderly. I'm not good at organizing, because my specialty is destroying. I'm using this whole fourth floor solely for my own purposes, but if you want, you can take a peek at the third and second floors on your way back. My work rooms are as scattered as an island of dreams."

"I will pass," I turned down Utsurigi's offer. "There are plenty of classified items, I am sure? Shito-kun would be angry at me. And, that was probably why this room was selected as our meeting room."

"Professor Kyouichirou did say something like that… Heheh, he's quite a strict fellow."

At the very least, I was unable to read any emotion, like anger or begrudging, that would be expected from someone who is imprisoned in a space like this from Utsurigi's face, as he referred to Professor Kyouichirou as *he*. That said, I also did not read the opposite, like respect or fondness for one's boss, either.

In fact… I could not imagine whatsoever what this person thought.

"Now, my turn."

"Please go easy on me."

"Leave it to me," Utsurigi said with a rather retro-style boast. "Question. How much interest do you have in the opposite sex?"

"… As normal, I would say," I answered as I tolerated the usual sexual harassment. "Is that not obvious?"

“Hahah. That’s not what I meant,” Utsurigi said, and I could not tell whether he understood what I was thinking as I thought. “I am inordinately pleased that I can epigraph words from the former *Cluster* member *Double Flip* here. There is no more pleasing fun than speaking of a friend you are proud of.”

”…..”

Double Flip.

Or as Kunagisa calls him, *Hii-chan*.

“What words?”

“His words with regards to girls. *Let’s say that there’s a dog. I would not kick that dog. I would not crush its head with a brick. If that dog is starving, and I have bread in my hand, I would give it to that dog. If it wags its tail and walks to my side, I would pet its head, and if it turns on its back, I would tickle its stomach. If it comes to it, I would let it roam my room and take care of it. I would forgive it if it bit my arm. However, despite that, I do not wish to be collared to that dog.*”

”… You have quite a downer of a friend, Utsurigi-san,” I gave my honest opinion. “It is not right to compare a lady to a dog.”

“Hahah. *Cheetah* said the same. And then *Double Flip* answered, *Oh, then you must be looking down on dogs as a lower lifeform than humans. Hmm, so you’re fundamentally discriminatory. Hahah, a hypocrite. My, my, what a pitiable man. You should just die. Not that you have any purpose to being alive, anyways. An existence where your life simply causes other people trouble, and only when you die do others relax and feel at ease. Only being useful to others by being dead, in fact that’s even worse than a dog. I see, I thought you were a cheetah but you’re just a dog. That’s funny. Hey, dog, then will you look for something, for me? It’s about a bone.* Incidentally, after that they had a wrestling match.”

”… Sounds fun.”

It was a story that was hard to comment on, so I absentmindedly responded.

“Not that we have the ability to feel the emotion called fun. Now, if Kunagisa Tomo is not a sister to you, then how about a pet?”

”……”

“Truth be told, she’s as loyal as a dog, isn’t she? **To you, anyways.**”

Those words sounded like they had more meaning. As if he had the confidence such that he has

a hidden wildcard up his sleeve for me. It did not seem like a mere bluff.

"Realistically, I think *Dead Blue* is a very convenient thing for you. After all, she's a direct descendant of the Kunagisa blood. A child of a family that can fund a laboratory of this magnitude deep inside the mountains, that can fund someone like that *Mad Demon*. Even though she's disowned, her influence is still enormous. After all, there is the matter of her sibling, Kunagisa Nao, and plenty of others within the family that still offer her their help. Just by being by her, you could say that your life is insured."

"….."

"And as for her, she has blue hair, and despite her age, she still boasts a young body, and no matter how bizarre she is and how many other quirks she has, she's quite a cute girl. Cute, cute girl, enough to **turn one on**. Being able to do as one wants with her, being able to do as one desires, is a seductive tale for any boy."

"However, that does not sound very pleasant," I interrupted Utsurigi. "Do I look like that type of person?"

"….. Heheh. Even a boy like you can grow angry," Utsurigi's expression seemed to say, *gotcha*. "Was it because you were insulted? Or was it because your feelings toward Kunagisa Tomo were insulted? Or perhaps because I was spot on?"

"I am not particularly angry. All I said was that it was not a very pleasant tale."

"Was it. I feel pleasant. Beyond pleasant. Because I am talking about a friend, with a friend of that friend, and there is nothing more mirthful than this. … How well can you handle computer media?"

"Not that well," I felt suspicious as the topic suddenly changed as I answered. "I took an electrical engineering class or something, though."

"Ahh. *Verge* did say something like that. That you were part of the ER3 system, that massive think tank," Utsurigi nodded to himself in understanding. "I see, I see. That makes sense; you're smarter than you look, then."

"You heard about me from Kunagisa?"

"Yeah. Do you want to know what she said? Do you want to know what lines of expression were spoken by Kunagisa Tomo?"

"No. I am fine."

Utsurigi smiled, as if he understood something about me given my immediate response. It was

an unpleasant smile.

"… Computers are by far the most most most excellent of devices developed by humans. That can be said not for the hardware, but mostly for the software. They can follow intricate programs using rules that cannot normally be understood, and at a super high speed. They make anything possible, act in a grand language differing from humans, and can arrive at a result that took humans a hundred years in five minutes. Yet on the other hand, despite being such an inexplicable, unbelievable device, even an ordinary person can control it. Switch a button, and the computer stops. There are some that say that's why computers were able to prosper among people. Controlling a computer satisfies the inner craving of *having dragged something greater than oneself to their own level*."

"….. I,"

"No matter who, people want to always be the one in command. Now, having taken a glimpse into the dirty desires of mankind, let's bring the subject back to Kunagisa Tomo. She's without a doubt a *genius*. We first bring up her memory, which makes one wonder if she has a ridiculous number of disc farms loaded into her. It's the maximum amount of RAM possible for a human being. And, there does not exist a single person who has seen a program she's written and not been mesmerized. Beauty means the lack of pointless pointlessness. It means there's no surplus or excess. Programs written by *Dead Blue* have no wastefulness whatsoever. Not just her programs, the hardware she produces as an engineer, the motherboards and CPU have no wastefulness, either. *Dead Blue* was on a different dimension even in *Cluster* when it came to *not being wasteful*."

"….."

"Do you know what *Dead Blue* was called when she was young? Of course you know, you wouldn't not know. She was called by a single word: savant. Obviously one doesn't need to borrow a French word to express it, for whether you call her the English word genius, or the Japanese word tensai, or call her by a German word or a Chinese word or a Swahili word, the meaning doesn't change. Because there're no national borders to talent. Back when I was still a lonely hacker, when I still dreamed that I was someone lonely, I heard a rumor that a direct descendant of the Kunagisa house held within her such a Godline talent, and so I waged a war[4)] on her."

"War……"

"War, war, war. We're not very fond of one another, but don't we all share the same feelings? Some feel jealousy, some feel worship, as every person takes a gander at her. Of course, even I

wanted to get in contact with Kunagisa Tomo – though at the time my thought was more *must contact the enemy* – and so I tried many means, but as you'd expect of the Kunagisa Syndicate, they didn't make things easy. I had to give up. That's why when she formed *Cluster* and contacted me from her end – I cried with joy. I'm not exaggerating, I really cried. Laugh if you want to laugh, that an adult past the age of thirty, had been saved by a girl of fourteen."

"……"

Of course, I could not laugh.

It was not something that one could laugh at.

"No, I honestly think it's a sham. A terribly comical sham. Think about it. The Greatest Brains in the World – heheh, embarrasses me to say that myself, but nine of the Greatest Brains in the World gathered, and what they did would simply be the playthings of a younger child. It feels like an extreme waste of talent, misuse of talent. Frankly – if all of us used our talents in a more **proper** direction – we could become like guardians of justice, could make this planet a much more fantastic star. Hey, don't you think I'm exaggerating?"

"– I do not. As you say, if all of you had been virtuous, saving the world would have been as easy as baking apple pie. But, that's an impossible premise. In the end, that is part of what makes a genius. The nine of you from *Cluster* – the nine including Kunagisa, were not outliers. The people in this research facility are probably the same, and even the geniuses I have encountered throughout my life, each one had their own abnormal quirks. And by abnormal I do not just mean *from the perspective of society*. Everyone – was jarred somewhere. A humane genius would be the one that is the outlier. I am not as romantic as a dreamy girl to expect humaneness from people with talent."

"Is that discrimination toward dreamy girls?"

"How do we get there? At the very least, I prefer dreamy girls over dreamy middle-aged men."

"Are you talking about me? However it's just as you say. Most geniuses have some anti-social aspects. Or rather, society has always been unkind to people with talents. Few harbor pleasant feelings toward geniuses who can swipe away all of your value in a single instant."

"… Please cut it out, Utsurigi-san," I finally became unable to restrain myself as I spoke. "If you want to say something, how about you just spit it out? There is a limit to how roundabout you can be. Your conversation is merely drawing it out. Not that Goethe said this, but really, if you were a novel, I would have stopped reading here."

"Well that's a shame. This is where it gets fun."

"I cannot imagine so."

"Reading a book that you feel is boring to the end without slamming it against the wall calls for courage – or so it was said. According to Dazai Osamu. Lonesome geniuses always say good things. Don't you agree?"

"….. Then, shall I draw out my own courage, and have some level of expectations?"

"Yeah, have expectations. I'll take you up on that, in the name of *Green Green Green*. ….. However, genius – a good word, but one that I can't help but feel is far too widespread nowadays. Think about it, it's not that hard or rare to be called a genius. Do you think any person in this laboratory has never been called a genius at least once in their life? Even Shito-kun and Misachi-san. Although I don't know about you, who came as an associate of *Dead Blue*, and your guardian Suzunashi-san, but it's not that significant to be called a genius. What's tough – is to be aware yourself that you're a genius. And obviously I don't mean in a delusional way."

"What's the difference between awareness and delusion?"

"Who knows, there might not be a difference at all. At the very least, if you or I were to decide, nothing might change. But, even you know the difference between predicting and knowing, right? You predict that a six will show, and roll a die. Six shows. Hey, does this mean the person who predicted it is talented? No. But if they knew a six would show, it's different. There's no doubt about it – truly no doubt about it, that such a person is a genius. Back in the day, there was a past where I predicted that I was a genius. But it was a delusion. Thinking back on it makes me embarrassed, actually. But when you go there – Kunagisa Tomo, she's terribly self-aware, don't you think? Don't you think she has a firm grasp on her own genius?"

"A comparison not quite like you, Utsurigi-san. The relation is also overused. I acknowledge that she is a genius, but–"

"You acknowledge, and I acknowledge. However, the one who acknowledges it the most is Kunagisa Tomo herself. Self-consciousness and self-awareness are both related to self-confidence in any living species, but you don't need me to explain that theory, right? If you want the evaluations by other people, you would need the talent to see through the senses of others. However, in order to achieve absolute valuation, you need to know yourself above all. Not to become self-aware through the comparisons of those around you, but to acknowledge yourself through yourself alone. You don't test yourself, as testing is unnecessary and testing is never done. You don't require the world to live, and that's the identity of absolute genius, awareness."

”……”

“Now, she’s that sort of *White Out (Genius)*, but on the other hand, **everything else** is terrible. Kunagisa Tomo boasts unparalleled abilities in tinkering with machines and constructing applications, but she’s completely ignorant about everything else. There’re disabilities for extreme imbalances in talent, like the famous Idiot Savant Syndrome and more recently Asperger’s Syndrome, but her case is like another step above the normal syndromes. Her infantile manner of speech, her disconnected thought process. She displays a spectacular level of failure at anything related to people. Well of course, after all, she’s lacking *emotions*. Maybe lacking is too strong, but she’s certainly not got enough of them. Perhaps she does have enough, but she doesn’t know how to control them, at all. As such, she can’t read other peoples’ emotions. Human relations, in the end, are simply like looking in a mirror. It only works out because people assume that the other person is thinking the same way they do. You can’t communicate with someone that doesn’t appear in the mirror. Well, not that I’m allowed to say something like this, but… forgive me. Anyways, that’s why that *genius* Kunagisa Tomo ends up not being able to live alone. Because she’s so out-there, she cannot live alone. Yet because she’s so out-there, she must live alone. Hahah, what an amusing psychological (paradox),” said Utsurigi as he pointed at me. ”….. If something like you didn’t exist, Kunagisa Tomo wouldn’t even be able to keep living. Leaving aside whether that role must be performed by you, for Kunagisa Tomo to continue living, she must rely on you for living processes. If we think of Kunagisa Tomo as a computer, then she’s just the terribly fundamental mechanism prior to the loading of an operating system. Now, a question. How do you feel, with a genius under your care?”

”….. You ask a bit too many questions, Utsurigi-san,” I said while looking upward. “If you have any manners, you should only ask one question per turn, or at most two.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps it’s as you say, but perhaps you can also give me that little bit of service, can’t you? Servitude without seeking gratitude is the adhesive to human relations, you know. Answer me. How do you feel, **owning** Kunagisa Tomo?”

“Do you want me to say *she’s mine, and I’m not giving her to anyone else*?” I slowly, gradually raised my head, and glared at Utsurigi. “What a joke. If you want her, you can go ahead and take her.”

”……”

“You cannot speak for me. Because I cannot speak for myself, either.”

“Hmmhmm. You mean that you won’t speak for yourself, not that you can’t speak for yourself. On your own accord, anyways,” Utsurigi did not back off at all. “You’re overcome with fear at what you might need to speak for yourself about, aren’t you? You’re afraid of what would result if you were to corner yourself. You’re afraid of fear. You can’t help fearing yourself. Isn’t that right?”

“Perhaps. But, so what? There is no right for you to talk ill about me. Even if you did, I would not stand for it. Kunagisa is a friend to me. I am a friend to Kunagisa. Is that not enough?”

“For now, sure. For now, that’s fine,” Utsurigi nodded. “For now, that might be fine. But you… eventually, you’ll run into a wall. Because such a vague, indefinite relationship can’t last forever. If you run into a wall and realize it, that’s fine, but if you run into a wall and die, that’s that. Do you realize that, right now? It just looks to me like you’re averting your eyes. Turn end. Now, I shall accept a question from you.”

Utsurigi leaned back in his steel-pipe chair, bracing himself for my question. I wavered at what to ask next. No, it was already determined what I wanted to ask next. I hesitated at whether I should ask that or not. However, in the end, I said it.

”….., Utsurigi-san. About *Team*… about *Cluster*.”

“Call it whatever you want. That’s just a proxy name, anyways.”

”….. Why was **something like that** formed in the first place?”

I said.

“What and how were you thinking, to organize something like *Team*… like *Cluster*, and then act?”

”….. So that’s your core.”

The look in Utsurigi’s eyes changed. Those Cheshire-like eyes that outwardly seemed to be smiling seemed to flip around completely, as his eyes turned into an obvious look of someone shooting, digging through me.

“Easy. It’s several tens and hundreds times easier for me to answer your question than it would be to twist the wrist of a baby. Truly simple, one sentence. ….. However, to be honest, I don’t feel it.”

”…..? What do you mean?”

“In other words, if you think me as being honest, then it would betray your hopes. Unfortunately, I don’t carry an answer that would live up to your expectations. In this case, *Double Flip* might have been able to pull something off, but I can’t do that.”

”……”

“Do you still want it?”

Utsurigi combed upwards through his white hair. And then he took off his sunglasses, placed them in a pocket on his lab coat, and then looked at me with his naked eyes.

“If you want to hear, I’ll answer. But that wouldn’t be an answer out of kindness. Rather, you should understand that it would be a malicious answer from **us**, those you **took** Kunagisa Tomo from. Even then, even then do you want it?”

“I want to hear it.”

I, with nary an instant, not even a moment of wavering, nodded. This indecisive, half-assed me, nodded without any hesitation.

“Please tell me, Utsurigi-san.”

“Because *Dead Blue* sought it.”

Utsurigi did in fact answer it with one sentence. He answered so simply.

“All we did was **abide**. That was her word, and we followed. She was not just our leader. She was our Kaiser. And we were *Dead Blue*’s pawns as well as her slaves.”

“Urgh–”

I slumped forth.

My knees felt like they were collapsing. My legs alone were no longer able to support my weight, and I grasped at the wall. However, even that was not enough, and I had to press my hands against the wall. It felt like the wall was going to fall down on me. No, I was just on the verge of falling over. However, something needed to be done, for it felt like my existence was about to end.

”– tsurigi–”

I. I. I. I. I.

And, as I tried to formulate words.

“Hey! How long are you going to be talking to Utsurigi-san!”

I heard Shito-kun’s yelling along with frantic knocking from the other side of the door.

“Seriously! What’re you doing!?”

“Heheh…..” Utsurigi shrugged his shoulders at the voice and changed his seated posture. He took the sunglasses out of his lab coat and put them back on. His eyes returned to being that fake smile.

“Alright, Shito-kun! We’re done talking! ….. Hahah, I guess that’s all for now. I still had questions,

but let's leave it be. **Mr. Friend of Kunagisa**."

"….. It seems so," I put all of my strength into my legs and pushed my body from the wall. "It seems so, Mr. *Green Green Green*."

"Heheh. Tomorrow, come again. Let's have a more constructive talk then. You'll be staying here one or two more days, anyways, right?"

"Yes, well, probably….."

"Bring that guardian lady of yours, Suzunashi, tomorrow. From the way *Verge* put it, she seems like an interesting woman to talk to. Wouldn't take a backseat to you."

"She will punch you if you say any sexual harassment."

"I honorably appreciate your kind-hearted worry," Utsurigi laughed unperturbed by my sarcasm. "But don't worry. My body's quite firm. I'll be fine being punched. Heheh, well, give everyone my regards."

"Everyone…?" I tilted my head to the side. "Who?"

"Everyone. Shito-kun, the professor, Misachi-san and other fellows. You seem to have met Koutari-san and Neo-san."

"Yes. The long-haired one and the round one."

Yes, yes, Utsurigi nodded.

"Neo-san's roundness can no longer be helped – roundness is his trait – but Koutari-san's long hair would make his eyes go bad. Make sure to warn him about that, if you would."

Understood, I said, and then I went to open the door, "I will be going, then." But then Utsurigi called out to me again, "wait a second." I asked, "What is it?" without turning around. My right hand was already gripping the doorknob. Shito-kun was on the other side of this door, and Kunagisa would be nearby. Kunagisa. The Kunagisa Tomo I know was on the other side of this door.

"Last question, Mr. Friend of Kunagisa."

"….. That is odd," I did not turn around. "Utsurigi-san started the questions, so it would be unfair for Utsurigi-san to ask the last question."

"Then the next turn will start from you, would that suit you? And this would just be a one-sentence answer, the same as the question you asked me. A simple question. It won't take your time."

"Huh… well, I do not mind. What is it?"

Utsurigi did not answer immediately, and after a few moments, he spoke.

"You–"

He asked toward me.

"—- You–"

He carefully carved into my brain.

"You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?"

2

Some tens of minutes later – Kunagisa and I, once again, were in Professor Shadou Kyouichirou's First Ward. Kunagisa and I were sitting side-by-side in the same fourth-floor room that was Professor Kyouichirou's visitor room. Professor Kyouichirou was apparently currently in a third-floor laboratory room, and Shito-kun had gone there to report to him that *Kunagisa and Utsurigi's meeting had finished*.

As such, I was alone with Kunagisa.

Alone with.

With.

….. However, was that really the case?

Perhaps it was simply such that one and one were in this room, and not that two were with each other?

"…..? Ii-chan?"

Eventually, Kunagisa peered in at me from the side. From below, she looked at me with her large eyes.

"Hey, Ii-chan. You haven't said anything in a while, what happened?"

"….. Hm?" I raised my head. "Huh? I was not saying anything? That is weird. I thought I was passionately theorizing about the religious conflicts and the dominance of the nobility in Medieval Europe."

"You weren't."

"No, I was."

"You were not."

"I was theorizing!" I could no longer back down. "As a descendant of Napoleon, I am obligated to think seriously about these things. As someone who will eventually reign over all of Europe, I must have a firm grasp of the past history of the land."

"Ii-chan, did Sacchan say something mean to you?"

She ignored me.

Kunagisa seemed just a tad anxious, and continued speaking as if she were worried about me.

"Sacchan isn't supposed to say that to anyone he doesn't care about, though. But I can't think of why Sacchan would fixate on Ii-chan."

"….. No, he did not say anything to me in particular. Nothing, in particular. He just asked about what has been happening around you of late," I answered, feigning normalcy. "Maybe he wanted to know about your surroundings from a different perspective? Anyways, nothing was said to me."

"Mmhmm…"

Kunagisa did not seem appeased, however, in any case, she nodded.

I leaned all the way back in the seat and stared up at the ceiling. The fan was going round and round, circulating the air in the room. While gazing at that meaninglessness, while gazing for whatever reason at the current of invisible air, I slowly exhaled, and tried changing the flow of air just a little.

Of course, this action led to nothing.

There was no meaning.

"……"

I was once asked.

Do you love my sister?

I was once questioned.

Do you like Kunagisa-chan?

To both, I answered almost immediately, *of course not*. Twice of twice, two times of two times, I answered thus. A third would likely result the same, and even a fourth. The fifth would be the same, and no doubt the sixth as well.

Almost immediately, I would shake my head.

That was all.

However–

You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?

I, to that question from Utsurigi, forgot almost immediately; finally, I was unable to answer. I could not answer.

"……. Why."

Why was I unable to answer that question, that simple question, that question that could be answered with one phrase?

There was no need to be truthful. There was no need to be honest. Because there was no need to be truthful or honest to that man. All I needed to do was let the topic pass, even if I needed to lie, and continue onward as ever.

As I did to her in May.

All I needed to do was use nonsense.

Why…..

"Scum….. how pathetic. There is a limit to how humiliating one can be. No, not humiliating, in this case it would be a lack of self-comprehension… what is this scum doing?"

Should just die.

Why are you alive?

"….. This is too pitiful….."

"Hmm? Didja say something this time? Ii-chan," Kunagisa tilted her head to the side. "I couldn't hear you."

"….. No, I was talking to myself. I am half-made of talking to myself, after all. However, no no, regardless," I forced myself to sound energetic. "I do not want to sound like Suzunashi-san, but he was surprisingly normal, Utsurigi. I was imagining someone more incomprehensible like you or Chii-kun."

Comprehensible.

Normally, this should be an advantage for me. However… as should be expected of the destructive specialist in *Team*, that *Green Green Green*. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, astounding.

To be able to destroy even nonsense.

"Normal… wouldn't be the way I'd put Sacchan," Kunagisa said in a rare show of hesitation.

“Well, I can’t really explain it well. Still, what a pain.”

“Pain, what?”

“Ii-chan heard too, anyways, right? Sacchan doesn’t wanna get out of here.”

“Ahh… that. Yes, he said that.” Not even just not wanting to leave, he seemed to have no interest at all in the matter, and seemed to be more interested in my relationship with Kunagisa. “You didn’t persuade him?”

“I did. I did, but, I did, but. Persuade – that’s a pretty empty refrain in front of Sacchan. Sacchan wouldn’t stop for something I say. Utsurigi Gaisuke has no red[5] – he’s green[6], green[7], green[8].”

“Would not stop for something you say… are you not his leader?”

“Ex, leader. But you know, even though we were *Team*, everyone did what they wanted… it’s pretty surprising we actually managed to stick together. That’s why it’s not so much that *Team* disbanded so much as it just collapsed. When talent surpasses a certain threshold it becomes too much to handle – that’s an exhausting episode I’d rather not remember, though.”

“Considering what you told me about Chii-kun, that is probably true…”

“Mmm. What a pain, what a pain. Boku-sama-chan’s going through too much pain. It’s like a battle royale of pains in the butt. Am I really supposed to be thinking this is such a pain?”

Just as Kunagisa folded her arms in a formal way, the door opened inward, and Professor Kyouichirou and Misachi-san filed into the room. This was the first time I had seen the Professor up close, and he did not have an imposing figure, and was more akin to a small old man. He was even using what looked like a wooden cane from a bygone age. However, you could tell from the way his body was here and there that when he was young, he must have boasted quite the build.

Professor Kyouichirou took one glance at Kunagisa and I, and seemed to blatantly smirk and laugh.

“How was it?” he said with a hoarse voice. “Your nostalgic re-encounter with your friend, it went well I assume, Lady of Kunagisa.”

“Yup. It was very much so, fun,” Kunagisa answered with a smile. “It was so fun it was like a dream. It was worth coming here for it. He said let’s talk tomorrow, too.”

“Is that so, is that so. That’s great,” the professor said, satisfied.

“But I would prefer that you leave that at a level that won’t interfere with work, Lady of Kunagisa. We aren’t just twiddling our thumbs with boredom this deep in the mountains, after all. Unlike you,

we aren't in a state of *having time and money to spare*."

"Money aside, I feel like I told you before that I don't really have that much time. Well anyways, I feel like I've figured as much on that topic," Kunagisa said. "I've figured as much and I'm still doing this, so there it's pointless to try to act like I'm not. More importantly, Professor. I'd like to get into business soon, do you have the time and tolerance to have a discussion?"

"Tolerance? Of course, I always have tolerance when it comes to young people."

So Professor Kyouichirou said as he moved, with a calm pace, to take a rather questionable position right in front of Kunagisa Tomo, pausing in a way that it looked like he was looking down at the seated Kunagisa.

"However – that guardian of yours, she's not here. Are you alright with just that unreliable-looking boy by your side? Lady of Kunagisa."

"I appreciate your worry, but I'd rather not partake in a pointless conversation, Professor. You actually know, don't you? What sort of person Ii-chan is."

"……"

Professor Kyouichirou clicked his tongue in a blatantly irritated manner, turned to Misachi-san, and said,

"Hey. Leave."

"What? But, Professor–"

"I'll not stand talking back. To be more clear, I'm saying, *disappear*."

"……"

"Want me to be more clear?"

"– No, I understood."

Misachi-san did not speak back, as told, and simply bowed once and then shuffled out of the room without even her footsteps being audible. She had the talent to be a maid, and so I felt Shito-kun's invention was quite a sin, but perhaps this is simply a case of a wrong situation.

Talent – I did not want to sound like Kunagisa from earlier, but it is rare for a word to be such an empty refrain in this research facility. With two such geniuses so close by, is there any meaning to the word talent? So much for some things being forever.

Kunagisa giggled and laughed.

"As always, you don't think of people as people, Professor. Why such a Professor would dip their

hand into artificial intelligence is something I absolutely cannot comprehend."

"Cannot comprehend? I would never have imagined the Lady of Kunagisa saying something like that."

"……"

"Hmph. What an extremely unpleasant child, you," the Professor said with a venomous tone, stepping away from Kunagisa. "That face, those eyes, those lips, that silhouette, that body, that smile, that speech, everything is bothersome."

"Hey, Professor….." I could not resist butting in. "Such words should not be spoken by a gentleman."

"By a gentleman? You're a shallow brat to be expecting something like that from this *Mad Demon*," the Professor laughed. "And, this isn't particularly rude. This Lady of Kunagisa wouldn't be hurt by my words. She doesn't think anything of me from the start. Isn't that right? Lady of Kunagisa."

"That's a mean way of looking at it, Professor. You don't have to look at it with such a twisted mindset, do you?"

"But it's the truth. You're, you know? Only looking at Utsurigi Gaisuke, aren't you? Yes, in actuality you're not looking at me at all, and have no intention of looking at me," the Professor continued. "Do you remember – well, that's a dumb question. Seven years ago, when I had a laboratory in Hokkaido, that day when you and your brother Kunagisa Nao both visited."

"……"

"At the very least, I can't forget that day. Hey, brat," the Professor turned the conversation toward me. "This Lady, this Lady who was 12 years old at the time, when she saw the fruits of thirty years of my research, what do you think she said?"

"… I do not know. I cannot even imagine."

"*This is actually amazing research*," Kunagisa interceded. "*If I didn't take this seriously it'd take me three hours* – is what I said."

"……"

I could imagine that scene clearly. She would smile, just like she did at me six years ago, and with an ordinary, very ordinary tone, say that line. Without any malice, without meaning any ill, without meaning to hurt nor humiliate others, without imagining that the Professor would have taken thirty years.

Unconcernedly crushed–

Professor Kyouichirou under her shoes.

"It's not my fault. Nao-kun didn't tell me that the Professor would have consumed his entire life on something like that. So cruel, Nao-kun. Don't you think so, Ii-chan?"

"Hmph. That **brat** is also most unpleasant," the Professor spat, against even a person heading the organization backing him. "Indeed – you siblings both trampled over me. I still see that day in my dreams."

I looked at Kunagisa and whispered, "– Incidentally, what did Nao-san say?" Kunagisa groaned, "Ummm."

"*Do not fret, Professor. You should continue your research without paying any heed to my sister.*"

She imitated Nao-san's speech mannerisms.

"That sounds normal."

"It's normal, right? I wonder what was wrong," Kunagisa tilted her head to the side. "Maybe it's because he said afterwards, *after all, we cannot allow my esteemed sister, a direct descendant of the Kunagisa bloodline, to perform such menial labor*?"

"Doubtlessly."

I did not have any intention of supporting Professor Kyouichirou, but one would obviously not feel great about having their own field trashed by such an absurd pair of siblings.

"But that's a long time ago, Professor," Kunagisa turned to back to the Professor. "And that was said by a kid. You shouldn't dwell on it so much."

"Whether a child or a girl, it's still talent. Lady of Kunagisa. Isn't that right?"

"….. You know. It's not like I came here to reminisce. I don't think I'm taking the Professor lightly, but in that case, Professor, why can't we have a conversation more like what you'd expect from two people with academic history? The Professor's attitude isn't really an attitude of someone who's willing to talk."

"That goes for you as well, do you actually want to talk? Lady of Kunagisa. No matter what happens, the Lady wants to abduct that Utsurigi from me, don't you?"

"Abduct is a vicious word to use here."

"But what the Lady of Kunagisa wants to do is exactly that. You want to take away one of my

fellows in this laboratory."

"……"

"I won't give him to you."

The Professor said, bluntly.

"No matter what happens – even if the Lady of Kunagisa is on the other end, I have no intention of letting go of Utsurigi Gaisuke. I have not the slightest intent to discuss this. My opinion won't change – and Utsurigi Gaisuke's opinion won't change."

"– And that's the thing."

Kunagisa lightly shrugged her shoulders.

"That's the thing. Sacchan – he's not the type to bend his own will. Even back when he was part of *Team*, **restraining** Sacchan was the toughest. I could control him but I couldn't restrain him, and that's why he's *Green Green Green*. Sacchan was the only one I thought I might not be able to handle within *Team*. To be able to control that Sacchan at your will, Professor, what are you doing?"

"Nah. He and I just think the same, that's all. Our topics of research matched, so we decided to work together."

It was an obvious lie. That was clear, given the conversation with Utsurigi earlier. But at least on the surface, that was their explanation for this situation.

"….. It'd be nice if we'd be able to have a bit more of a… human-like conversation, I had some sort of hopes like that. Maybe that was just my hopes coloring reality, though."

"Human-like, eh," the Professor said with a sarcastic tone. "….. However, a human-like conversation, that would be done with a human, wouldn't it? –**Miss Monster**."

"Ii-chan!"

Kunagisa yelled.

Not at Professor Kyouichirou, but at me.

At me, who had begun to stand from my chair.

"Don't move. You can't move."

"….."

"What's the point of rampaging here? I'm talking, right now."

"….."

"Ii-chan."

"….. Ok."

"….."

"I said ok."

"….."

"I said ok. I get it."

I sat back down, and opened my balled fist. I tried glaring at the Professor to make myself feel better, but the Professor did not seem to mind my look at all, and simply snorted, "Hmph."

"I see. As the Lady of Kunagisa said, he doesn't seem to be just a wussy brat."

"……. I guess."

"Hey, Brat. You seem to have been outraged by my not treating the Lady of Kunagisa as a human, but you're also not treating her as a human. Brat, do you understand? How it feels to be an old man being looked down upon by this little girl?"

"Of course I would not," I answered, annoyed. This was a different sort of unpleasantness than speaking to Utsurigi. "I do not want to hear from someone older such prepubescent words."

"Of course you wouldn't. You wouldn't, at all. What sort of talent is beside you, you wouldn't even have a clue."

"……."

"Hey, brat. To be honest, I'm a bit envious of you," the Professor said, pulling just a hair of enmity from his voice. "No, envy is probably a bit different. Yes – from my perspective, you're doing something astonishing without any trouble. The astonishing act of being beside Kunagisa Tomo."

"……. Astonishing act."

"It's an astonishing act, you can be proud of it. Even I am a single person before I am the *Mad Demon*, and I pride myself on being able to see talent within people. I'll also acknowledge that that little girl is on a different dimension of genius, and that she harbors brilliant talent that humiliates this Shadou Kyouichirou, who was once also called the same. – But even so, to want to be by that side, such a thought doesn't even come close to crossing my mind."

"……."

"I wouldn't be able to tolerate it. Wouldn't be able to tolerate it. I would rather die than be by the side of that monster."

"….. Will you please."

"I won't let you say you don't feel any inferiority toward the Lady of Kunagisa, brat," Professor Kyouichirou said. "Given how you reacted earlier, you're not some insensitive idiot who can live without feeling anything about Kunagisa Tomo."

"You say something similar to Utsurigi-san."

Although their opinions went in completely opposite directions.

Green Green Green worshipped *Dead Blue* as a god.

Mad Demon feared the *Blue Savant* as a monster.

However, all that meant was that their directions were on opposite vectors, because what they meant was the exact same. As they both defined me an idiot beyond saving, they were the exact same.

However.

"Really, I am getting tired of that type of wording. I dislike stereotyping. You are all like broken records, pitiful. That desire to fit people into your own sets of measurements–"

"Professor."

Kunagisa interrupted me. Butting into someone speaking is a rarity for Kunagisa. And to top it off, she was interrupting me.

"Professor. Let's drop it, that sort of thing. Talent, genius, I don't care for that impertinence. I'm through with painstaking stuff like a discussion of ideologies, the debate of ideologies. Let's leave that sort of theorizing to liberal arts philosophers, science professor. To be honest, I feel sorry for the Professor for not having aaaaaaaaany talent in your head, but stop blaming that on me. Kunagisa Tomo holds no responsibility for your incompetence."

"– Wha-"

The Professor's face flushed red at Kunagisa's extremely touchy words. I was surprised, too. This was the first time I had ever seen Kunagisa so blatantly provoke someone.

"Isn't that how it is? The reason you're locking Sacchan up here is because you can't do anything yourself, so you need to use Sacchan's power, right? How you placated, ensnared… blackmailed Sacchan I don't know, but that bragging of research that you did using other peoples' skills, could you stop that too, while we're at it? Actually, I don't even care about that. From the bottom of my heart all the way out, in any and every case, I don't care about you at all. What the Professor is

proud of, what the Professor cries of, Kunagisa Tomo is responsible for absolutely nothing. So I'll just say one thing."

Kunagisa Tomo spoke.

"Give Sacchan back."

"……."

"**That belongs to me.**"

"……."

"**I place what belongs to me by my side.** At the very least, it's unpleasant to have him owned by the likes of you."

"….. That's your own opinion," the Professor barely managed to retort. He retorted to *Dead Blue*. "You threw that away. What's wrong with picking up what's on the ground?"

"Even things I've thrown away. **Even things I've thrown away are still without a doubt mine.** It's unpleasant to have something you've thrown away picked up. … you know, Professor. *Dead Blue* is extremely greedy. Do you not even realize that much…?"

"….. I won't give that to you."

The Professor repeated.

"Even if you prostrate yourself, I refuse. That – is my one and only advantage over the Lady of Kunagisa. It's the one thing, even if it's just one, even if it's borrowed, that I am triumphant over you about. I can't let that go."

"– Boring. So it's just envy?"

"Envy – I can't help if that's how it looks to you, but don't take me too lightly. If you were to know what I'm doing now – this time, even the Lady of Kunagisa would be shocked."

"Mmhmm. I guess if you think of the cast here, it might be impossible to do it in three hours – after all, even Sacchan is here."

"….. This discussion is over."

The Professor distanced himself from Kunagisa and then sat in a nearby chair.

"Or more like, there's no room for discussion. Considering how radically opposite our standings are, there's no hope for compromise."

"There there, let's stop concluding things so quickly. Sorry, I might have gotten too emotional," Kunagisa smiled vibrantly, and showed Professor Kyouichirou both of her palms. "I apologize. The

Professor seems to be really busy today, so tomorrow, let's talk again, more calmly. I have a bunch of gifts for you, too."

"….. Right. Tomorrow, again," said the Professor, and the chuckled as if he just remembered something. "….. I don't know what sort of wild card you have up your sleeves, but I think it'll be a futile effort. As the Lady of Kunagisa said – Utsurigi Gaisuke never bends his will. Regardless of whether that will was imposed or not."

"….. Maybe."

"The inn is deep in the woods. It might be a bit dirty for the Lady of Kunagisa, but tolerate it. After all, we're deep in the mountains. Shito will guide you. Shito's waiting in the lobby of the first floor, so go see him. Well, see you tomorrow – Lady of Kunagisa."

So said Professor Kyouichirou, who then turned his entire chair away, as if to signify that there was nothing left to say.

"….. Yup, tomorrow."

Kunagisa said, and then she stood from her seat and pulled my hand.

"Let's go, Ii-chan. He said Shito-chan's on the first floor."

"….. Alright. Got it."

I stood as directed, and let myself be pulled away out of the room, leaving Professor Kyouichirou.

Kunagisa Tomo and Shadou Kyouichirou.

Their relationship seemed so shallow, yet it was surprisingly dense. It was not *don't care*. No, the dense relationship might just be from my perspective, or perhaps from Professor Kyouichirou's perspective, and Kunagisa herself might really not care. And that utter lack of care was another gash in Professor Kyouichirou's pride.

It was not that I could not understand.

Not that I wanted to understand anyways.

However, unfortunately – and not just for Shadou Kyouichirou but also for Kunagisa Tomo – their conversation was sliding right past each other. They were both clearly discussing, but they were discussing different topics. It could be compared to a competition between oil and water for the cup. There would be never be anything like compromise like that.

Youth and gender is also a type of talent–

There was certainly some significance to the words the Professor spoke.

”……. But, you know.”

Green Green Green, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Mad Demon, Shadou Kyouichirou.

Dead Blue, Kunagisa Tomo.

Outrageous – though if I were to be borrowing the Professor’s choice of words, there are three outrageous monster-class geniuses stepping over each other.

To be honest, I did not understand what any of the three were saying. Perhaps this lack of care for understanding was what Professor Shadou Kyouichirou called *shallowness*. It must be. Being smart is itself an unfortunate thing. You end up seeing what you do not need to see. You end up hearing what you do not need to hear. You end up learning of tastes you do not need to know, and you end up smelling odors you do not need to smell. Well, that sounds alright if you intend to become a cook.

”…….”

All smart people should become cooks.

Yes, this was a phrase that did not feel lacking compared to the words of that Professor Kyouichirou. I thought that while thinking of the cook on that island.

Then, as we walked down the hall – Uze Misachi-san was sitting in the smoking room.

“Ah, Misachi-san,” Kunagisa called out first. “We finished speaking to the Professor. You should be able to go back now, I think?”

”– Well thanks.”

Misachi-san pressed her half-smoked cigarette (eco-friendly) on the ash tray and stood up. And then she tried to walk past us without saying anything, but then she seemed to remember.

“Ah, about Suzunashi-san.”

She began.

“I was guiding her around as told – but along the way, we ran into Professor Kasugai and Professor Miyoshi, and it seemed they meshed well. Right now they should be speaking in the smoking room of the second floor. They should still be there, I think, so if you are looking for them, please make your way there.”

“Why, thank you.”

Kunagisa said the same.

Misachi-san turned away again, but I called out to her again, “Misachi-san.”

“Um, I have something I wish to ask, if it is alright with you.”

”– What is it?”

“Why, what reason do you have for working here?”

”…….”

This was the same question I had asked Shito-kun. In the end, Shito-kun had answered *you wouldn’t understand* and pushed me away, but what would Misachi-san say–

“I prefer to have no opinion.”

Misachi-san said, clearly and bluntly.

”…….”

“If you do not have anything else, I shall take my leave.”

”….. Yes. Thank you for your time.”

Misachi-san turned back toward the Professor’s room without a smile and briskly walked away. She had no hesitation in her steps. Perhaps she had no intent of being friendly to visitors like us. Being the secretary of someone like the *Mad Demon* must come with its share of exhaustion. In that sense, I thought we may share similar thoughts, but given the conversation just now, it seemed that would not be the case.

“She said Neon-chan’s on the second floor, Ii-chan.”

”….. I see. Well, let us go.”

I tried to nod as carelessly as possible, went past the smoking room, and arrived at the elevator. I pressed the button to go down, and then entered.

“However….. tomorrow,” I could not handle the silence and ended up voicing my thoughts. “The way it seemed, no matter how much you two talk tomorrow or even the day after, unless that grandpa suddenly dies of old age, nothing would change.”

“Ahh… yup. That sounds about right. I’ve got some thoughts. I’ll explain once we get to the inn. Someone might be listening here, and I need to think about some things. More importantly, Ii-chan,” Kunagisa looked at me. “Can I hug you?”

”….. What is that?”

I forced myself to have a nonchalant attitude toward Kunagisa’s sudden behavior. “You have never asked such a thing before. You hugged me whenever you pleased, however you pleased.”

“Hmm. I just feel like that now.”

“I see. That love comedy feel.”

“Is what,” Kunagisa smiled innocently. “So, can I? Just inside the elevator then, please.”

“I do not mind. Recharging, right?”

“Yup,” Kunagisa said as she wrapped her arms around me.

And then she pressed her body against me, buried her face in my chest, and showed no signs of loosening her grip. Even so, Kunagisa’s slender arms did not trouble me.

Did not trouble me.

Did not trouble me.

”……”

That was time for just Kunagisa and I, time that we had not had in a long time. It was irreplaceable time, such that I thought I would be willing to throw anything away for this.

”– Or perhaps, that is also nonsense…..”

I thought while being embraced by Kunagisa.

What did Kunagisa speak to Utsurigi about? What sort of conversation occurred between the reunion of the former *Team* members?

I did not know. I could not know.

I am not a genius, and Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke were geniuses who could comprehend each other. They were geniuses who had fallen far more than even that Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

However–

I could not even begin to imagine what Utsurigi and Kunagisa spoke about, but I remembered everything, not just the final question, about my conversation with Utsurigi. I remembered absolutely every bit of Utsurigi’s detestable, every surface and every angle being detestable, unpleasant-to-the-core questions.

The nonsense-killing questions.

”—……”

The elevator stopped. We had arrived on the second floor. However, Kunagisa still did not seem to want to let go. I, too, said nothing, and did not move to peel Kunagisa off. Of course I would not. Of course I would not be able to.

The opened door closed, and for a while, we continued sharing time like that. Time for ourselves.

Kunagisa's hands at my back. Kunagisa's arms wrapped around my torso. Kunagisa's face pressed into my chest. The blue hair I could see by looking down.

And–

And, that small face, which wasted not one byte, had a surplus of not one bit, in constructing a circuit of complete beauty.

Utsurigi related it to having memory power of the ultimate RAM. However – and Utsurigi himself probably realizes – that that relation was slightly wrong.

Kunagisa Tomo, no, *Dead Blue* had within her brain circuits not RAM but ROM. That was why she would never forget anything she remembered, and was packed with information that could never be changed or overwritten, to become an endless ring of information. Parts and whole melded together equally in an endless collection.

It was not a power for remembering.

It was a power for not forgetting.

There were very few that related Kunagisa Tomo to *being like a computer*, but I do not know if they truly felt that. Perhaps they had said such a thing, yet in the back of their minds still thought *even so, she is still a human, too*–? There was no basis or logic to that – so that might just be my hopes coloring reality. Well, I hope so, because otherwise I would be too pathetic.

However, Utsurigi seemed to be sure. That Utsurigi Gaisuke, who relates Kunagisa Tomo to being a *device*, worships that as *Green Green Green*. And indeed that must truly be the case, I think. A mere user of nonsense like myself could not know whether that is the case, but it must truly be the case, I think.

As such – as such.

That was why Kunagisa Tomo would never forget.

She did not forget. She cannot forget.

How she was duped by me six years ago, how she was treated by me six years ago, how she ended up because of me six years ago – she cannot forget. Even if Kunagisa herself wants to forget, she cannot forget.

How sinful, how encompassed in penalties a human I am.

Will not forget.

Remembers.

And yet, she embraces me like this.

She forgives everything.

Like a mother toward an infant child.

Like an owner bitten by their dog.

Like a tolerant goddess.

She forgives everything.

"– Laughable."

I mumbled in jest, without laughing at all.

Utsurigi asked if I intended to own Kunagisa Tomo.

Professor Kyouichirou asked of my feelings of being beside Kunagisa Tomo.

Of course I cannot answer such things. I do not own Kunagisa Tomo, and I have never been beside Kunagisa Tomo.

In the end, I am just like Green Green Green, just like Cheetah, just like Double Flip, just like the rest of *Team* – simply owned by Kunagisa Tomo.

I am the one being owned.

The way I was being owned was just different from Utsurigi and others. And the way I am owned is just more vicious than Utsurigi and others, that was all.

"—……"

How can something owned walk alongside the owner?

"Yup. Recharging complete. Let's go, Ii-chan."

"Right."

I answered, normally.

Answered, I think.

"It would be wrong to leave Shito-kun waiting for long."

"I know, right? Ahahah," Kunagisa pressed the *Open* button. "But Neon-chan said she might not be able to strike a conversation with the laboratory fellows, so I wonder why she's talking to Kokoromi-chan?"

"Who knows," I answered without care, as we stepped out of the box. "Maybe they stumbled on a rousing topic?"

3

"Well yah, call it the ER Program or what have ya, but it's still just a school, so there're still those tests at the end of the year, ya know, that ya gotta pass or else you're forced out, if ya get what I mean."

A bright, cheerful female voice.

"Mmhmm–," this was Suzunashi-san's follow. "Then of course, Inoji must have taken those tests, too."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. If ya wanna know what sorta tests they are, boy they're the worst. They've got a hundred problems gathered up from every subject, but ya only got sixty minutes. And ya need sixty points to pass. Ya might think that's easy just by hearing that passing grade, but those hundred problems, from problem one to problem one-hundred, each one's hard enough that they aren't taking just one minute per, ya know."

"Hahahah, I can see where this is going," Neo-san's flamboyant, exaggerating voice. "So basically it's that, in the allotted time frame, you must find and select *only the problems you can solve*? It must be a test for your *observation* and *decision-making* skills. Fufu, Japan would never think of such a thing; the ER Program lives up to its name."

"Yup yup, pretty much. In other words sixty points isn't the minimum. Actually ya might as well call it the *perfect grade*. There're problems in that hundred that ya absolutely can't solve, so it's set up so ya can't ever get a hundred."

"What an underhanded system," Suzune-san. "That said, some real mean teacher must have come up with that test."

"Yah pretty much. Putting out such an S-class difficulty test in a situation when failing means being forced out, I wouldn'ta thought of it, but there were a lot of nutty teachers there. Anyways, so, whatcha think that Monkey Talk [9] did?"

"The norm would be that, that he scored perfect anyways," Neo-san. "Getting a perfect on a test that you're not supposed to get perfect. That boy seems the type to do something preposterous like

that."

"No, zero sounds about right, too," Suzunashi-san. "Including the intent to revolt against that teacher, stubbornly handing in a blank sheet of paper."

"Fufu. Sounds good. And, Koutari-chan what do you think?"

"I don't know," Koutari-san answered briskly. "But if I were to imagine the punchline, he would pick that one problem that isn't supposed to be answerable, answer that correctly, and mess up everything else, that's the type of guy he seems to be."

"Ufufufu. Nah, everyone. Y'all three gave me three different answers, and lookyhere, they're all right!" the voice said proudly, and then there was the sound of a table being slapped. "Neo-san said it's a *test of observation, decision-making skills*, but it's also a test of insight. That boyfriend, like Koutari-chan guessed, answered just the hardest question – and left the remaining ninety-nine questions blank."

"….." "….." "….."

"Surprise surprise, that's the *perfect grade* that the *test-making* teacher sought. They'd decided that they'd progress **the students able to answer the hardest question regardless of everything else**. Regardless of everything else – in other words there wasn't any point in answering the other questions from the start. Ya can't solve that one problem and not solve the others, basically. So ya know, all ya had to do was solve that one. He saw through all that, and instead of wasting effort, spend all sixty minutes on just that one problem."

Attaining the maximum result using the least effort–

That was the solution sought.

"I see. Quite a roundabout problem. That does sound much simpler than finding sixty problems that can be answered. As such, Koutari-san and I both had correct answers – although insight can't be replicated without an incredible amount of conviction. *Solve the problem by imagining yourself in the maker's shoes* I suppose is the fundamental thought. My, my, quite the boy, isn't he," Neo-san. "– however, this beautiful lady's answer hasn't been accounted for, has it not?"

"Yah. And that's why that Monkey Talk is so tough to handle," and with a brief pause. "– that single answer that was turned in with so much confidence, was wrong."

And then she burst out laughing alone.

Has not changed. Has not changed. Has not changed in the least. Has not changed in the least bit in any which way. Since that time she teased me down under during my stay at the ER

Program, Miyoshi Kokoromi-san – or rather, Miyoshi-sensei has not changed at all.

"Well, in the end, they recognized his insight, at least, so he passed – not one other pulled off that craziness, ya know –"

"– Kokoromi-sensei."

I realized that left alone she would say things better left unsaid, so I stepped out of the shadows of the hallway and into the smoking room, showing myself. In the smoking room was the tall, all-black Suzunashi Neon-san on the far right, the enormous body of Neo Futuara-san on the far left, in front of him Koutari Hinayoshi-san whose long-black hair obscured half of his body, and to the right and front – to the right and front was Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei.

Short, blond hair, and glasses that make you wonder if the lenses are a tad too big. She had an oversized white labcoat draped over her back without her arms through its sleeves, and she was so small that it would be pointless to compare her to Suzunashi-san. Her appearance was such that one might imagine a girl around middle-school age acting like a doctor. Though, she probably would not have been **acting** such when she was in middle school. Because in elementary school she had already gotten the credentials to be a professor in biological dissection.

Miyoshi Kokoromi.

Her name was Kokoromi [10] but her expertise (and her joy and her hobby) was the exact opposite, as she specialized in completely dissecting biological forms and breaking them down and searching. She is so skilled at her craft that she was a teacher at the extremely large research organization, the ER3 System Project Program Department. And now, in the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou research facility, she was granted the third ward, and was the Number Two of this organization.

And – and, she used to be my instructor.

Of course, everyone who has taught you would fall under the category of instructor.

"–Heheh."

Kokoromi-sensei grinned like a mischievous brat, completely un-befitting of her age of twenty-seven. No, it has been three years since then, so she must be past thirty. However, her face, which lacked any trace of cosmetics, looked only like it belonged to a girl.

"Yo, Monkey Talk. An unexpected reunion," Kokoromi-sensei flashed me a peace sign. "What now what now, ya got an odd look like ya've seen *Fueru Wakame-kun* [11] for the first time in yer life. How ya doing? Have ya been good since? My student."

“At the very least, until just now, I was doing much better than I feel now. Yes – truly, an unexpected reunion, my instructor,” I answered, feeling my eyes naturally escaping from Kokoromi-sensei. “Sensei, too, you seem quite well, and healthy, and as usual, and unchanged, and such, and so, really, from the bottom of my heart, ……. the worst.”

On the road here, since I found out that Utsurigi was captive in that *Mad Demon* Kyouichirou research facility, since I discovered the name *Miyoshi Kokoromi* among the information Chii-kun provided, the anxiety I had felt the whole time, hit bull’s eye. The slim hope of just being an identical name was crushed here and now.

“I was just telling this Suzunashi-san about yer heroic deeds. Hysterical life or so, what sorta funny guy ya are. What now– I heard, ya know.” Sensei stood from the sofa and dexterously spoke with a cigarette still between her lips.

“Ya dropped out of the Program-? What a wasteful thing ya did! What’s in yer head right there?”

”….. Sensei left the System, too. That is why you are here, are you not?”

“Woah there, ya sound like ya didn’t want me here? Heheh.” Sensei wrapped her arm around my shoulder like old buddies. “But I didn’t leave on my own accord ya know. They just fired me.”

“It is not supposed to be possible to be fired from that place and be alive…”

But this person.

But this person is capable of twisting the impossible into the possible.

“Well thinking back on it now I might have done a wasteful thing too, ya know. I heard rumors, ya know, like, the System tops, the Fool of the Seas, they said one of ’em died and left a hole or something. If I stuck around maybe I woulda been the one filling that up.”

“Of course not. There are plenty of candidates,” I kept a facade of calm and I chatted. “Through the grapevine, they mentioned that another Japanese person may be selected. Saitou something… some strange name.”

“Was joking. Yer not even serious but you suck at jokes, ya. An ordinary gal like me wouldn’t be able to be a Fool of the Seas, ya know?” sensei said and laughed, “Heheheh,” and then slapped my back over and over again. “Yah. Ya still ya, that’s pleasing.”

”…….”

“But, indeed. Still, surprising,” Neo-san said extravagantly toward me, still captive due to Kokoromi-sensei. “I figured you weren’t just a random ordinary fellow, but I definitely didn’t expect

you to be an abroad student from that ER Program. Right? Koutari-san. Just as I said, right?"

"You said nothing."

Koutari-san's answer was cold. His arms were folded, and he had a very *I am only here because I tagged along, I would really prefer to go back to my ward* attitude. He was that apathetic and aloof, yet among these people, I felt closest to him for some reason.

"So unpersonable. But we should keep quiet about this to Oogaki-kun. He wanted to enter the Program but wasn't able to. Did the Professor stop him?" Neo-san smirked and continued. "But really, why'd you leave the ER Program? The ER System is an object of admiration to us academics."

"……"

The ER System.

To spill the beans, it is a privately-owned research organization that headquarters itself in Houston, Texas, United States. In a way, it could be categorized along with this *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility, but they are on completely different scales. Compared to that, without meaning any offense to Professor Kyouichirou, but you could basically say that this sort of facility located deep in the middle of nowhere may as well not exist. Collecting from the end of the world to the end of the world, every specialization of every academic field, like the British Museum, collecting them like overzealous, over-expanding Britons, and then mastering them all day and night like a sort of cult of *Scientific Religion*, and a fanatic cult society at that – is the ER System.

And the nurturing of the young performed by that extreme research organization is the ER Program. And to put it in blunt words to avoid misunderstanding, it was like a **research specialization school**. I will avoid detailing my past and such, but I participated in that program starting my second year of middle school, and around this New Year, dropped out of the Program and danced all the way back to Japan. And that brings us to now, but in the first two years of the roughly five years I spent there, I was instructed by this Pervert Dissection Maniac, Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei.

What sort of personality, and what sort of past she had is something I wish I could detail, but truth be told, I would rather not. To start with, that heroic deed that happened to be told to Suzunashi-san and others just now, the person who produced such an incredibly twisted exam was none other than this Kokoromi-sensei. I believe that is sufficient for explaining her.

That was why when I heard Kokoromi-sensei was leaving the System and returning to Japan, I

shouted with exultation. Myself and the other students who were likewise **bound** in tutelage under Kokoromi-sensei borrowed out an entire room that night and had a big party. I am not fond of such gatherings and normally turned invitations down, but even I participated that time. Not just participated, I even downed a shot of vodka in celebration of Kokoromi-sensei's leaving.

When she visited me when I was hospitalized due to acute alcohol poisoning, Kokoromi-sensei ominously prophesied, "Ya know, we'll probably meet again, so let's be friends again," and then left me, covered with graffiti with a marker even though it was not like I had broken any bones (do I need to say who did it?), and then left the hospital, left America.

And so her prophecy came true like this.

"Well, ya know I said that when we parted, but I didn't think we'd actually meet up like this again. Sensei's pleased! Really pleased! Euphoric!"

"Yes, I feel like I am about to cry with happiness, too."

Half of that phrase was not a lie, in any case. All of my old wounds began to ache, and I truly felt like I would cry. I shook away sensei's arm and said to Suzunashi-san, "Well, let us go."

"Shito-kun is probably worn out waiting for us below. If we do not hurry, he might turn into a very harsh straightman."

"Right," Suzunashi-san nodded as she stood up with her tall form. "Well, Miyoshi-san. Thank you for the very interesting conversation. I learned quite a bit."

"Naw, naw, if ya pleased by this stuff I've got plenty more to tell ya. I'll be in the third ward, so if ya want come over during your stay," Kokoromi-sensei laughed giddily. "Ya too hey, if ya got questions like old times come ask sensei whenever ya please."

"Pass," I immediately answered. "And, sensei is probably busy with work anyways."

"*Work* eh…" sensei faintly laughed. Ahh, this laugh. This laugh, that she made whenever she was figuring out how to insert a scalpel into something.

"But ya know, if **this** counts for *work* don'tcha think living would be real easy? Hmm?"

"……"

"Well, we've probably got plenty to catch up on, but we can do that when we've both got time, just the two of us."

"Catch up on? I have nothing of the sort with you," I borrowed Kunagisa's words and bounced them at sensei. "I have nothing to say to you."

“That’s pretty lonesome. If that were true, anyways.”

Sensei did not budge, continuing to chuckle.

“Well, shall we leave as well, Koutari-san. The Professor’ll scold us again.”

“He’ll only scold you.”

Neo-san nudged Koutari-san, and Koutari-san responded curtly to that, and they both left the smoking room, passing by my side. Neo-san gave an extravagant bow to everyone, and Koutari-san made no motion at all. Indeed, they were a pair that were on opposite extremes. Though despite that, it did not seem they were on unfriendly terms.

Then, I remembered Utsurugi’s words.

“Um, Koutari-san.”

”….. What?” he turned around with an agitated voice. “What do you want?”

“You should cut your hair.”

”……”

Koutari-san reacted as if he had just been told some sort of code, and then after a bit of silence, “None of your business,” seemed to cut me away instead of his hair. And then he lined up with Neo-san and walked toward the elevator hall.

“Alright, I’ll be heading off then too. Can’t leave Kasugai-chan waiting, ya know.”

Kasugai-san – right. Misachi-san had same something like *Suzunashi-san is speaking to Professor Miyoshi and Professor Kasugai*, but only sensei was here. Assuming that the odd couple had passed by and joined the conversation afterwards, where had Kasugai-san gone?

“Kasugai-chan said *it’s boring listening to stories about that inexplicable kid* and went back to the third floor alone.”

Sensei said, sensing my curiosity.

Yes, I do not know how she looks yet, but based on that, Kasugai-san seemed like a relatively ordinary person. Of course, I do not know if that will be the case, but I shall hope for that.

“Well, let’s have some sake the next time we meet. Alright then. Until then, have a good one!”

And then sensei left, leaving just Suzunashi-san and I in the smoking room. Suzunashi-san crushed her cigarette, which had already been burned down to just its filter, on the ash tray, and then turned to me saying “Inoji.”

“No problems with the meeting with Sir Utsurigi?”

"– I would not say without problems, but for the most part it went as Suzunashi-san probably imagines, without much difference."

"Mm," nodded Suzunashi-san. "That is largely positive. Good, good. Well, I steeped myself in this place as well. Although Misachi-san's stoicism threw me for a loop."

"You cannot call that stoicism. Stoicism would cry. So, what do you think? Of looking around *Mad Demon*."

"What do I think? – I have no idea what's going on. Well, not knowing what's going on is what was fun. But you know, it was like walking around a foreign country. Hey, Inoji," Suzunashi-san said.

"You know… Ao-chan and Sir Utsurugi, do they really have better minds than Professor Shadou Kyouichirou? If you were to ask me, having glanced about like this, it'd be hard for me to say that."

"You should not judge people by their appearance – although that might be silly to say to you," I shrugged my shoulders. "Who knows. That part is extremely gray. How smart someone is cannot be quantified, after all – not that we are referring to the exam that was mentioned earlier."

"….. If there were to be a problem, it may be to do with their generation."

Suzunashi-san mumbled with an odd confidence.

Shadou Kyouichirou – sixty-three years old. Utsurigi Gaisuke – thirty-five years old. And then Kunagisa Tomo – nineteen years old.

There is no point to comparing the full potential of each. After all, each person lived in a different era, and particularly in the case of the final one, Kunagisa Tomo, one can expect plenty of future growth.

Although one could say whether Kunagisa would actually grow is a question of its own.

"Don't you think a difference in era is more decisive than talent? Inoji," Suzunashi-san continued. "In the end – when it comes to what sort of era one's lived in, of the three, Professor, Sir Utsurigi, Ao-chan, the last, Ao-chan, has clearly been the most blessed. She's already got all the tools and routes. It's the same as if she were to play her hand last in rock-scissors-paper."

Those that must clear the path, and those that simply have to walk that path. Which is easier, and which produces more results, does not require any thought to answer. No matter what, the one who follows always has a superior path – well, that certainly is an argument with its merits.

However.

"It is not that simple…" at the very least, having listened to the two conversations earlier, I could

not believe such a thing. On one hand what Suzunashi-san said is the truth, but it was not the full truth. "….. You know, we normal people would not understand the problems between those three. I think it is better for us to not think about it."

"Perhaps. So, Inoji. Where's that Ao-chan? I do not see her, did you hide her in your pocket?"

"Ahh… I sent her off to the lower floor first. I thought it would be wrong to leave Shito-kun waiting too much."

"Hmm, sent her off," Suzunashi-san repeated my words. "….. In other words, you would go to that length, to the point of even leaving your precious, precious Ao-chan in the hands of Shito-kun, to avoid having Ao-chan hear about your past."

"….. What are you talking about, Suzunashi-san," I jokingly replied while continuing to walk. "Kunagisa knows everything – about my participation with the ER Program, about how I crossed paths with the ER System. Kunagisa's brother was the one who introduced me to them, anyways, so is that not obvious?"

"But you've kept quiet to Ao-chan about **what you did** over there."

It was a conclusive line. My legs buckled a bit.

"….. Did you hear something from sensei?"

"Heard… if I did it would be so much simpler," Suzunashi-san lined up by my side. She kept her eyes fixated ahead, avoiding eye contact with me. "Unfortunately, all I heard from Miyoshi-san were funny stories. She probably understands, you know. She seems loose-lipped but she always dodges the important stuff. Her light-hearted attitude is probably just a facade. You've got quite an instructor, Inoji."

"Why thank you," I forced myself to act the clown. "Your words of praise are much too great for me to accept."

"I wasn't praising you, though. I heard nothing. But Inoji, you have something you don't want heard, don't you? By Ao-chan, and if possible, by me, too. That you hid sensei's existence up till now is proof."

"Oh come, come. I had simply forgotten. That is not proof at all."

"….. Some people may find hiding their past and the like cool, but at the very least, I think that's stupid."

"….. I do not intend to be looking cool."

“Right, that’s right. So I won’t ask now. I understand how you feel, and I think you don’t necessarily have to say everything, even to Ao-chan. Everyone, you and I, even Asano, must live while carrying the burden of a stomach-full of secrets. You aren’t special that way. You aren’t special in any way. That’s why,” Suzunashi-san took one step ahead of me.

“Please stop betraying what you hold precious.”

”……”

Betray. Betraying.

”….. Suzunashi-san.”

“And that’s the end of this lecture. We can leave the rest for some other time,” Suzunashi-san turned around and patted my head. “Well, let’s hurry on down. Shito-kun and Ao-chan must be bored waiting.”

”….. Right.”

I slowly nodded.

And resumed walking forward. And I thought it was truly well that Suzunashi-san had accompanied us on this trip this time.

We used the elevator and arrived at the first floor. As soon as we appeared, Shito-kun shouted at us.

“You’re late! Did you all ride a turtle or something? What am I, Otohime? Don’t make me give you a tamatebako![12)]”

“That’s right, Ii-chan,” this time even Kunagisa agreed with Shito-kun. “Late, late. Boku-sama-chan was about to die waiting.”

“Sorry,” I quickly apologized. “And, Shito-kun, where is the inn?”

“Uwah, this bastard makes us wait all this time and just apologizes with one word. Ahh. I haven’t been there much myself. I just guide people there when we have guests. It’s like at the end of the trees. Near the wall. We all call it the *Haunted Mansion*,” Shito-kun said ominously, and then he threw the key to me. “Here, a key to a room. There’re three rooms, so use them however you want.”

“Thanks. Well, I will take a shower and wait.”

“Alright. I’ll head over as soon as I’m done with work so be ready– as if!” Shito-kun shouted. “Cut that out! Stop making me the butt of jokes! I’ll kill you!”

“And Ii-chan, that one was vulgar…..”

”….. Scum.”

The three of them stared at me coldly.

I tried to brighten the mood and this is what I get.

”– Gosh, what a stupid joke… Alright, let’s go.”

Shito-kun followed protocols to open the door, and we passed through the courtyard of the wards, heading deeper into the facility. It was the opposite direction of the entrance we used coming into the grounds, and it took us further from Utsurigi’s seventh ward.

Drip.

A drop of water grazed my nose. I looked up, and it was like the sky was about to cry. Within a few hours, we would be having some heavy rain. I vaguely thought that the failure of a human would probably analogize this as *a steppe of clouds cutting through like people toward people, like skies toward skies, like raindrops toward raindrops*.

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[1] sick, yamitsuki, pun!

[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HKnHnUk0S8 for example of process

[3] Based off Russell’s Paradox

[4] However, this is written 戦操. War is written 戦争 (sensou), but the latter letter is actually taken from exercise 体操 (taisou), resulting in something like a war exercise. I assume the reading is still sensou/war, however, so I kept war.

[5] stoppage

[6] indestructible

[7] impure

[8] immortal

[9] User of Nonsense

[10] soul-seeing

[11] expanding seaweed, which is basically just dried seaweed

[12] this is all a reference to Urashima Taro

一日目（4）——微笑と夜襲

春日井春日 KASUGAI KASUGA 研究局員。

Day 1 (4)

Mild Laugh and Night Assault

0

A tragedy isn't when an incident occurs.

When an incident doesn't occur, it's a tragedy.

1

What Professor Shadou Kyouichirou said as *too dirty for the Lady of Kunagisa*, what Assistant Oogaki Shito said as *Haunted Mansion*, were not exaggerated at all. If anything, they were incredibly fitting.

It was a such a building that one might think it would better be called an abandoned building more than an inn, such that it seemingly had never been touched up since its construction, such that it may have been built as an experiment for a report on how concrete solidifies. Such a building stood at the back of the forest, so it could only be an object of fear. It would be more surprising for a ghost to not appear in this inn.

Of course, our group consisted of Suzunashi Neon and Kunagisa Tomo, both of whom astoundingly showed no reaction at all, or if anything seemed to be on the side of being pleased. Suzunashi-san said, "my, it seems quite fitting. I wish I could take a photo, Asano would be overjoyed," in a cool fashion, and she seemed so eager to enter that she was tugging my shirt, which seemed to cause Shito-kun to be genuinely frightened.

An abandoned building… or which could also be described as a three-story inn. We were to stay on the second floor, through the three doors that were aligned right next to the stairs. Kunagisa took the first door, Suzunashi-san took the second door, and I took the third door. Given the outside, I thought I should not expect much of the interior; however, the interior was actually relatively alright.

Of course, alright was still simply relative to that exterior. If we were to bring that extremely fastidious maid here, she would probably go insane, unleashing all of her pent-up stress, is what I absent-mindedly thought.

We finished our belated dinner, then laundered our lives by taking a bath in order (Suzunashi-san → Kunagisa → Me was the order we took a bath. By the time I went in, there was almost no water left. It was because Kunagisa had put up a fight), and then after midnight, the three of us gathered in Kunagisa's room.

Kunagisa was lying around on her bed, Suzunashi-san leaned against the wall while almost dozing off, and I had my back to the door, wondering why Suzunashi-san's pajamas were a china shirt.

"Hmmm. Hmmm hmmm hmmm."

For whatever number time, Kunagisa groaned.

"Really, what to do-."

"What to do-, you mean about Utsurigi?"

That had come up in our conversation many times over dinner and also when Suzunashi-san was taking a bath. It was a topic, but of course no solution ever came forth. There would never be a solution for that. And I said,

"There is nothing that can be done, is there?"

The same thing I said during our discussions to this point.

"If the obstacle were only Professor Kyouichirou it would be one thing, but – if Utsurigi himself does not intend to leave, then it would be impossible to drag him out."

"That's the thing – that's why I'm in a bind. Ahh, gosh. Boku-sama-chan hates being in a bind-."

"……"

Utsurigi had apparently said to Kunagisa.

Indeed, by being here I end up in the shape such that I am submissive to Professor Kyouichirou. This workplace is like a garbage can compared to when you were the leader, when I was surrounded by members like Cheetah and Double Flip.

But that's because you had, and they had immeasurable talent, and so this place isn't too shabby. Professor Kyouichirou pursues things I think of. Isn't that enough? Two people thinking is always better than one person thinking, after all.

It was a truly reasonable answer.

It was a truly far-too-reasonable answer.

Reasonable such that it could not be true.

"Sacchan isn't the type to say something like that – he must be hiding something important," Kunagisa rolled over on the bed. "I don't know what, but he's definitely hiding something, that Sacchan."

"Something – that is probably related to Professor Kyouichirou's confidence. That steadfast confidence," I said. "However, whatever he is hiding and whatever he is not hiding, either way Utsurigi has no intention of leaving that building, right? Let us say we somehow miraculously succeed in dragging Utsurigi out from there. But then we would have to compromise with that Professor Kyouichirou, right? Given the conversation earlier, I cannot help but feel like that is also impossible. The phrase inflexible and obstinate senior fits him perfectly, so it is not whether it might be impossible, it just is impossible. And one impossible might be something that can be dealt with, but two together? There is nothing that can be done."

"Impossible and impossible… well, about Professor Kyouichirou – yup, right. Sacchan was always an unpredictable factor, but I had already prepared a way of dealing with that one. But, I didn't think he'd actually still be holding a grudge toward boku-sama-chan. What a grudge-holder."

Kunagisa squirmed across the bed. Squirm I said, but she remained facing upward, so that looked rather eerie. Or rather, this was the first time I had ever seen someone move by squirming on their back.

Kunagisa scrounged through her belongings, and then pulled out some circular case with a disk, and tossed that to me. I caught it with my right hand. Of course, I am not a CD drive just by having caught it, so I could not read its contents just by that. I asked Kunagisa, "What is this?"

"According to my knowledge, having studied electronic engineering at the ER Program, I can deduce this to be a circular disk."

"Yup… well, if you couldn't deduce that much you'd be having a tough life ahead."

"CD-ROM. Hmm… so this is the reason why you said *a bunch of gifts* and *tomorrow*?"

In other words, Kunagisa's wild card.

"Actually that's not a CD-ROM, but, exactly. Egg-zact-lee."

Kunagisa swung her hand up and down. It seemed she wanted it back. I tossed the case back

like a frisbee, but Kunagisa did not catch it with her hand, instead taking it in the face.

"….."

"….."

"….."

"….."

"It hurts."

Well of course.

"So you were wanting to exchange the contents of that with Utsurigi Gaisuke. However, data that can be compressed in under 700 MB and the intellect of Utsurigi Gaisuke, an ex-member of *Team* or an ex-member of *Cluster*… the Professor did not seem the type to accept such an unbalanced trade."

"Information isn't quantity but quality, Ii-chan. If you get fooled by numbers for everything you'll take a pretty big beating, in a lot of ways. Forget 700 MB, there was a genius machinist who **brought** electronic darkness onto the entire world with a mere 16 byte program."

"What is that. *Green Green Green*?"

"– even Sacchan wouldn't do something that grievous. Sacchan knew of limits – just knew, but anyways he knew. But **that** never bothered learning about limits. The one who did that wasn't part of *Team*. Rather, **it** was like part of the extreme opposite."

Kunagisa's expression momentarily turned into something very unpeaceful. It was the same expression she showed when she was dealing with Utsurigi Gaisuke, when she was confronting Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

"**It** wasn't a hacker or a cracker, or any branching issue like that. – you know, Ii-chan. There definitely **are**, in this world. For a slight whim, for no reason whatsoever, off a tiny ponder and thought, without the least of effort, inhumane ones that want to stomp all over the planet. Non-human-species for whom the logic and theory and tactics and strategies that our human side uses are completely and utterly useless. *One* that far surpasses the *Cluster* **exists** – no, once **existed**, that sort of being. The existence called *Desert Fox*–"

I felt as if a cold breeze had swept through the room. However, before I could realize that this was just a false feeling, Kunagisa returned to her carefree tone and expression, and she said "well, leaving those outlier cases aside," while picking up the case.

"But Ii-chan's worry whiffed either way. This disk has plenty of quality as well as plenty of quantity. This is called a C3D and is media that boasts a memory capacity of 140 GB. It's not produced for practical purposes yet… but it's probably a question of time. Anyways, this has lots and lots, without wasting a single byte, of data. Chii-kun and Acchan helped me, too."

"So the *suspicious activity* that you had been doing while cooped up in your room is that," I nodded. "I see… a wild card. Certainly and certainly that is not ordinary. Then that might indeed have enough value to trade of the intellect of one genius."

After all, it is an extreme work of art produced by three former members of *Team* from full scratch. I did not really comprehend, having never seen it myself, but if a person with knowledge were to see it, if a scientist specializing in information engineering or mathematical theory were to see it, they would see *information* worth ditching everything for. And that came in a package of unprecedented proportions, a whole 140 gigabytes. Even that stubborn Professor Kyouichirou's wall might–

"– then why are you worried? If you have this, then the first problem might as well already be dealt with."

"Yup. But Ii-chan probably deduced too, having spoken to the Professor, but – I mentioned it, didn't I, while we were walking to see Sacchan? That the Professor's progressed even more."

"You did say something like that," I remembered something vaguely about a scientist's duty or lifestyle or something. I responded while remembering. "And?"

"So, that's what. That's that," Kunagisa sighed. "Boku-sama-chan was careless, too careless – there's no real point in saying this now, but I thought something was strange. That someone like Shadou Kyouichirou – this isn't sarcasm, Ii-chan. Leaving aside my reaction when I was twelve, right now, boku-sama-chan actually thinks Professor has been doing something amazing – that someone like Shadou Kyouichirou would do something like obsess over Sacchan's intellect, I could never figure out the answer. The Professor is plenty genius without doing something like that, and he wasn't the type to have any interest in honor or status or anything."

"But Utsurigi's **level of genius** is on a higher plane from the Professor, right?"

"It's not a question of high or low. **Higher plane** isn't something that works for genius. And, you probably understood this well from the **conversation** earlier, but – that person, is quite proud. Right?"

"Right, but…" or rather, I felt like that attitude leaned more toward the side of abnormal. "… so

what?"

"People with a lot of pride, they have a lot of problems, but that's one area where you can trust them."

"Hmm. Well I would have to nod to that…"

Indeed, someone who cared for honor or status would probably not stow away deep, deep, deep in the mountains like this. That was not just for the Professor, but for all the other researchers as well.

"However, then why is Professor Kyouichirou so fixated on Utsurigi…"

If, just if their stated reason was truly just a fake. Then what was the Professor trying to do, accepting such a dishonor?

"He was still cute when he was researching artificial intelligence and the possibility of artificial life… but I see, that's without a doubt *Mad Demon*. No matter how you try to defend it, that thought process is very inhuman. He's completely fallen," Kunagisa suddenly sat up and then looked at me. "Ii-chan, to begin with, what do you think a *Demon* is?"

"…..? A demon, you mean like a devil, right?"

"Yup. That's one way of looking at it. That's certainly one way. Ii-chan's way of putting it might be right. But, in the world of information cryptography, where the Professor resides, it holds a different meaning. A *Demon* is a **process** that waits and carefully observes for a **certain condition**, and waits and waits and waits and waits some more, and then when the condition materializes they execute their pre-configured function. ….. perhaps the Professor, since meeting boku-sama-chan – no, even before then, may have been waiting – for this type of chance. A mad demon – an insane process. Well-stated. Sacchan's preferred psycho and logical way of thinking is far better."

"……"

Kunagisa said all of that with a very serious tone, but I did not understand in the least what Kunagisa was saying. Not talking about the same thing – this seemed like a case of that. Kunagisa's feeling of danger was not coming across to me. What was she fearing, I could not piece together at all. However, even so, there was no mistaking that things may be turning out for the worst.

"I don't get it. But basically," Kunagisa said. "That chance that finally appeared, that chance, that opportunity that finally appeared when he became sixty-three, whether the Professor would trade that for one or two of these discs is actually very dubious."

"Does that mean what the Professor is doing has more value than the contents of that disc, which

was created by *Team*, *Cluster*?"

"That's not it. I'll guarantee that in terms of value this disc is probably much higher. A hundred of a hundred people would answer that way, and it would be the same if we raised the number to a thousand people. But determining the difference in absolute value and relative value is hard to calculate. Not to steal the Professor's words, but one scientist threw his entire life – an entire single life into that research. I think that's irreplaceable, that can't be traded for anything. If I were to think about it from something other than logic or fair trade."

"Really? I would have to disagree," I questioned Kunagisa's lines. "I do not think a scientist would say such a romanticized thing. In the end, Academia is about getting to a result and deflecting everything else, right?"

"My, Inoji. That's an odd thing to say. The entire profession of a scientist is a romanticism, isn't it?"

Suzunashi-san, who I had thought was already in her dreams, suddenly broke her silence, cutting into our conversation.

"Without being a romanticist, no one would think of something idiotic like firing a rocket to the moon. Getting perfect marks on a test, too, is after all just a boy's romance, isn't it?"

"Romance…"

That may indeed be as Suzunashi-san said. I thought of one scientist that I met this April, and nodded at Suzunashi-san's words. However, I could not imagine that old man Shadou Kyouichirou was so simple. He was far away from such simplicity, an incredible vile type of person. I am saying it, so it must be right.

"And you know. I thought maybe I shouldn't butt in being an outsider, so I tried to stay quiet, but this conversation is still really messed up, Inoji, Ao-chan," Suzunashi-san continued. "Inoji, first of all, you said *let us say we somehow miraculously succeed* earlier, but that isn't a problem you can be taking into your own hands, right? Why is Inoji the one dictating Sir Utsurigi's will?"

"No, that was just part of the conversation…"

"Hah, part of the conversation. What a handy phrase," Suzunashi-san laughed, dryly. "And then, Ao-chan."

"Uni?" Kunagisa twisted her neck toward Suzunashi-san. "Did boku-sama-chan say something odd?"

"Something odd… no, maybe it's more odd that someone like me would be talking back to a girl as smart as Ao-chan, but I'll say it anyways," Suzunashi-san paused for a moment. "Hey, Ao-chan, I

just think, if Sir Utsurigi himself says he doesn't want to leave this place, isn't that fine? If Sir Utsurigi is fine being here, then why do you want to push him out with you? If you're thinking of *saving* him then that's just being selfish. If Sir Utsurigi wants to remain here of his own accord, then you're just butting in."

"But Suzunashi-san," I could not restrain myself, firing a retort at Suzunashi-san. "According to Chii-kun, Professor Kyouichirou has blackmail… **or something like that** over Utsurigi. And based on our conversation with the Professor, I feel like that must be the case. That means that Utsurigi is being restrained here. In other words, even before his physical imprisonment in the seventh ward, he is being locked in place by an invisible chain. Then – in that case I would not be able to call it his own will."

"Even so. Did Sir Utsurigi say to Ao-chan or Ii-chan *please help me*, or even show it in his demeanor? If so, I would understand. Fine, in that case even I would try to help. Not to steal Asano's words but a man must show his dutifulness – this is what any person would do."

She said, and then Suzunashi-san stared straight through us.

"However, right now you two are wrong. Completely wrong. Absolutely wrong, so wrong you're shooting the wrong way. So wrong, so wrong, that you're on the opposite extreme. That… who was it? Chii-kun? You learned of Sir Utsurigi's *pinch* from Chii-kun's information, received help from Acchan to create a *plan*, and arrived here at the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility. Now, Inoji, where are you saying Sir Utsurigi Gaisuke's will lies? Or perhaps Ao-chan wants to say that because they were friends some time ago, that she can understand what Sir Utsurigi is thinking?"

"……"

"Suzunashi-san, you are going too far."

Kunagisa went silent, and I noted that and turned to Suzunashi-san. However, Suzunashi-san did not mind at all, instead responding, "Actually, not far enough."

"This isn't far enough at all," and this time Suzunashi-san turned solely to me. "Then, how about I say – what if miraculously and incredible and unexpectedly."

Because this was a serious mood I opted not to act the straightman.

"Sir Utsurigi actually wants to leave this place. Let us say that he really wants to leave but for reasons he cannot. Let's presume that with our own personal and biased judgment. However, despite that desire, he remains here – *imprisoned* do you want to call it? That's what he's doing. Then I think you should respect his decision."

"Respect…?"

"Respect. Because an adult man has **even thrown away** his own life, a single life in order to remain here, right? He's submitting to someone who's less talented than he, but he's fine with that, isn't he? Then isn't that alright? There's no reason at all to interject. It seems like you're mistaking something so I'm going to correct you on this, but Sir Utsurigi isn't a child. If anything, it's you two who've lived about half of him–"

Suzunashi-san pointed at me and Kunagisa, in order.

"It's you two who are children."

Children.

That is true.

Until it was pointed out to us, I was about to forget, that of course myself, but Kunagisa Tomo as well, along with her childish appearance, were both just children. A child of nineteen years and maybe three or four extra months.

"– yup."

After a while, Kunagisa nodded. She had an expression of seriousness that I had never once seen before.

"I think what Neon-chan says is correct. I truly think that what Neon-chan says is correct. About that. And honestly, even boku-sama-chan, if Sacchan really thinks that it's fine, I wouldn't bother interjecting."

"Hmm?" Suzunashi-san opened her eyes wide. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that if Sacchan is hiding something, then that's fine on its own. Boku-sama-chan has no intent of butting in to Sacchan's business more than needed. But, Neon-chan, the problem here is with Professor Kyouichirou. With the goal of *Mad Demon* Professor Shadou Kyouichirou."

"….. what do you mean?" this time I asked. "Of course the Professor seems like someone with a lot of problems… but by *goal*, do you mean the Professor is scheming something?"

"That's why – or rather, Ii-chan, don't you think it's weird? That there're only six researchers in this enormous facility? Add the Assistant Shito-chan and you still only have seven. When boku-sama-chan went to the Hokkaido facility with Nao-kun, there were at least thirty researchers."

"Well, I thought it was odd, at least – but that just means quality over quantity, right?"

This sort of research activity differs from sports in that just having superior numbers counted little.

In fact, having more and more people caused a meshing of a lot more thoughts, and causes things to lose clarity. Athletic prowess has a differentiation between top and bottom, too, but it is still small compared to the difference in thinking abilities and process.

"Yup, right, exactly. So, Ii-chan. Don't you think that the number one reason of having a small number of elite is because it's beneficial to keeping secrets?"

"I understand that, but… this facility does a sufficient job of keeping secrets, does it not? Is there any point in reducing the number of people on top of it?"

"On the other hand, you could deduce that the Professor is doing something that requires secrecy to that extent, don't you think?"

"….. you look like you deduced something."

"Yup. Just a guess, though."

Kunagisa paused.

"But, you know, you would have to be guessing to think of something like this. But you know, the architecture and placement of this facility, and the researchers that were gathered – Koutari Hinayoshi, Neo Furuara, and Miyoshi Kokoromi, Kasugai Kasuga – if you mix them together with Chii-kun's information – and then do some mental math, you'll probably realize that it's probably right."

"……."

"The reason for locking Sacchan – Utsurigi Gaisuke here isn't to perform research together – isn't for receiving advice. Professor Kyouichirou **isn't treating Sacchan as a researcher**."

"– not a… researcher?"

"Using Sacchan's power because of his own lacking – that was the wrong assumption. The Professor would never have done such a thing. Ii-chan. What Professor Shadou Kyouichirou is conspiring to do,"

Kunagisa.

Looked at me with a desperate, clinging look.

"Is to create an Ultra Humanoid Dogma[1)] using *Green Green Green* Utsurigi Gaisuke himself as an **test body**."

2

It is time for philosophy, curtain two.

According to what I heard from Kokoromi-sensei, it is considered common-knowledge among biological scientists that the most powerful life form on Earth is, without a doubt, bacteria. Bacteria exists everywhere on Earth and has propagating abilities full digits better than any other. If one considers bacteria's propagating abilities a 1, then even someone completely clueless would realize that human beings would rate 1/100,000,000,000,000. That is a number that mathematically is synonymous with zero. In other words, from the perspective of bacteria, humans might as well not exist.

However, bacteria have no intelligence. I cannot determine for sure that they do not have intelligence, for I have never experienced being bacteria myself, but I assume I can make that conclusion. And if you think from that perspective, *Humans have without a doubt intelligence. Therefore, it should be said that humans are superior life forms to bacteria. When and where would you find bacteria using a computer to enjoy the internet?* is a question that naturally appears. I think that is a perfectly fine way of looking at it. Regardless of whether the culture and inventions that human intelligence have brought forth are good or evil… no, **being that they are good and evil**, it is the truth that they must be acknowledged as being valuable.

However, I think that this would mean that it would simply be following the same path as the paradox of energy conservation. For example, if I were to create an application using C, I would first go to a bookstore to buy a book on C, no, I would first buy an introductory book, read that, and then turn the computer power on, and awkwardly and hesitantly type the language, and complete the application. Then on one hand, what would Kunagisa Tomo or Utsurigi Gaisuke, hackers that were part of *Team* do? Simple, they would **simply** make the application. How to do it, what to do, they do not think of such things. It is like riding a bicycle, and there is not even a trick to it. That is how veterans work. They do not even think. In the end, the reason why good memory does not equal genius is because unreasonable things like this exist. They do not even need to remember.

But no matter how superior they may be, what they can do is the same as me.

Is there actually superiority when it comes to human life forms which pieced together culture, society, research, technology, and academia in order to survive, and when it comes to bacteria which just live? Of course, I do not have even an inkling of intent to look up with reverence at the smallest of life forms, to look down with disdain on the gods of all things. What I am questioning is

not in this case intelligence itself, but the why of intelligence. If no matter how masterful and expertly you become you still do the same thing, then what is it that you might seek?

"Such questions should be stated once you have actually mastered something yourself, so some pitiful nobody like me saying that would simply be a self-pitying cry. Philosophy over."

I mumbled, and then opened my eyes.

It was past one in the morning. The place is the courtyard of the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility – a bricked area surrounded by the research wards – and I sat there alone. Afterwards I left Kunagisa's room and returned to my room, and went to bed at once, but in the end I was oddly awake – or rather I had too many things to think about – and so, unable to sleep, I sneaked out of the inn and walked all the way here.

It was not raining yet. The rain clouds seem to be teasing, as if they would rain any minute, any minute. It was fairly warm during the afternoon, but once it became midnight, as you would expect from being so deep in the mountains, along with the air circulation, it became quite cold. I thought, *why did you walk out despite it being so cold?* as I kept trudging forward.

Suddenly, I turned my head. I faced the third research ward. The third research ward. In other words, the abode of instructor Miyoshi Kokoromi. I wondered if that human dissection maniac was already aslumber. Who knows, these buildings (although there were for the inn) lacked windows, so there was no way to tell if there was lighting inside.

"……"

Researchers who lectured at the ER Program were a galaxy of peoples, and as a result, classes were taught in all sorts of languages, but when it would come to Japanese there only managed to be Kokoromi-sensei. As such, as a Japanese, and at the same time as someone who came from the Kansai region, I naturally became a sort of medium, and ended up interacting with Kokoromi-sensei a lot.

Of course, there were a good number of Japanese study-abroad students like me (and foreigners who understood the Western Japanese dialect), but most of them dropped out of the Program. The nickname given to Kokoromi-sensei, who forced one young talent after another to drop out of the Program was *Early Harvester*. Incidentally, the nickname given to me, the lone student to not drop out under Kokoromi-sensei's tutelage was *Harakiri*[2] *Masochist*.

"….. huh?"

Now that I thought about it, I feel like I was given the more terrible nickname.

"….. however, well, really, to end up meeting up again in a place like this…"

This trip was supposed to be a reunion of Kunagisa and Utsurigi Gaisuke, but it ended up becoming a reunion for me as well.

I remembered Suzunashi-san's words. The words Suzunashi-san said to me right after reuniting with sensei. And Suzunashi-san was completely correct. I do not want to tell Kunagisa what I did over there. Probably for the same reason that I do not want to know what sort of *Team* Kunagisa and Utsurigi and the others were.

"Y'know, I feel like I've become a really nasty person lately… was I always like this?"

In other words, that could mean that my facade was being torn off.

Just then, I heard the sound of an animal growling. As for where, in this darkness, where it was hard to even see myself, I would not know unless it were the enormous size of the research wards. I tensed up to some extent, and looked around. However, I saw nothing. Just as I thought I might have been hearing things, once again from somewhere, I could hear a growling, reverberating voice – no, sound.

"Can hear the voice but cannot see the figure… yet not hiding that odor…"

It was probably wrong to say aloud such an unfitting, joking line, as for just a moment, my concentration waned. And before that moment ended, **that** – no, **they** jumped at me.

One from behind, one from ahead.

"–!"

Of course, I was pushed down. I crumpled to the brick ground right-side down, and hit my left arm hard on the ground. I was able to cushion myself a bit, but it did not seem I would be able to get back up soon. No, even if I could **they** would not allow me. **They** pinned me down with immense strength, and then – **licked** my face.

"……"

And that was when I realized.

"….. dog?"

Dogs. Two, black and large enough to be the size of a middle-school boy, dogs. They **growled** as they **licked** my face. Saliva covered my face, and to be frank it was inordinately unpleasant, but *they* pinned me down with their front legs – and the two of them both, at that – so I was unable to move. I could not even attempt to struggle to break free, and could only let them do what they

pleased.

I see, I could not see them because they had jet-black fur and melded in with the darkness, and the reason why I could not discern where the growl was coming from was because there were two of them growling individually… I calmly thought while being violated by the dogs.

"————t."

A voice.

I heard a human voice, this time. I was not able to hear what was said, so I lifted my head a bit, and turned in the direction of the voice. Because of the darkness I was unable to see very clearly, but I could tell at least that someone was standing there.

"– stop it."

It was a woman. She said that with a terribly cold, yet astonishingly clearly enunciated, voice. The moment they heard that, the two dogs stepped away from me. And then they quickly trotted to where she stood. I was finally freed, and placed my hands on the ground to lift myself, and shook my head, and wiped the saliva off my face with my sleeves. When I looked at my chest, I found four clean dog paw-prints, like you might see in a comic. It felt more pathetic than pitiful.

"Sorry about that, boy," she said with the same, cold voice. "I didn't think any human would be walking about at midnight, so I didn't put a leash on them. I humbly apologize, like so."

It was a way of speaking that had no intonation whatsoever. There was not a single punctuation. But even so, it is a bit hard to explain but, her pronunciation and voice were as clear as a singer, and so it was not at all difficult to understand.

"……" I slowly stood up, and stepped closer to her. "….. no, I do not mind."

"A strange boy to say you do not mind despite having that much saliva on your face."

She laughed a little. And then she came toward me herself, and wiped my face with a handkerchief she took out of her pocket. I felt oddly embarrassed (in the sense that I can wipe my own face), but all I could do was let her do what she wanted.

While letting her do what she wanted, I observed. Lab coat. In other words, this means she is a researcher. I mean, this was not a middle school uniform or anything, and I do not think there is any obligation to always wear these things in a research facility, but it seemed in this Kyouichirou Research Facility, the researchers all had a habit of wearing a lab coat.

That means, this person.

"….. yes. Much manlier," she said that bizarre line more befitting an old lady, and put her handkerchief back in her pocket. "I'm Kasugai Kasuga – but you probably already knew. – are you the rumored Kunagisa Tomo?"

"No. The inexplicable kid."

"Ahh, the accompanying boy who came back to Japan. Now that you mention it your hair isn't blue. And you're a boy. You're a boy, right? I'm sorry. I couldn't tell because it's dark."

She nodded, and stretched her right hand to me. It seemed she was wanting a handshake. I hesitated a bit, but decided to take her hand.

The two enormous dogs meandered about at Kasugai's feet, as if in servitude to her. Now that I looked at them once more from a distance, I thought they had adorable faces. What is their species? They looked like Dobermans, but I felt like they were slightly too big for that. They were one or two sizes bigger than Saint Bernards or Pyrenees. Given their large size they might even be mixed breeds, but these two seemed to have a sort of an elegant air about them.

"I think it's quite dangerous to walk about at this hour," Kasugai-san said with a stern feel to her voice after our parting hands. "This is a research facility with some numbers of confidential things. Wouldn't you prefer not having a painless stomach sifted through? Or did you have business with someone?"

"Yes, well…." I responded with a stuttered tongue, in complete opposite of Kasugai-san. "I am actually trying to remember that right now."

"Trying to remember?"

"I have bad memory, so I forgot why I left the inn."

"You like jokes I see, despite how you look. You are that Miyoshi-chan's disciple, after all."

Kasugai-san laughed with just her lips, "ufufu." I was not joking or anything, but nothing good would happen if I were to try to persuade her by replying with something like, "no, really. My memory is like zero, so it is basically zero. I am scum. Sometimes I forget my own name. Forgetting would be alright but sometimes I remember it wrong. So in that case my memory is not zero, it is negative. When I was in elementary school, I wrote the name of the girl sitting next to me on an exam, and then answered everything wrong and caused her to get a zero, that is how stupid I am." I felt like it was better to be considered a joker than an inconceivable fool, so I simply said, "perhaps."

"Are you walking your dogs this late at night?"

“I like the night. These triplets also like night. Or at least, more than noon anyways.”

“Triplets?” I looked at the dogs at her feet once more. One, two. There were only two, if counting in decimal. “They are a triplet?”

“Yes. Do you hate triplets?”

“No, I love triplets. But, one is missing?”

“One is sick and being looked at – or rather to be honest it’s being experimented on,” Kasugai-san said without shrugging and without any trace of joking. “These two are waiting their turn. I need them to be healthy so I’m exercising them.”

Kasugai Kasuga.

Animal biology, animal psychology, beast molecular biology. While a scientist just the same, unlike Professor Kyouichirou or Utsurigi, Koutari-san or Neo-san, who tackled machinery or physics theory, reason or equations, yes, if anything she is more like the human dissection specialist Kokoromi-sensei, in other words a scientist that specializes in *life forms*. To her, all animals are not pets or objects of affection, but rather just objects of experimentation.

I looked at the two dogs once more. This is probably just a case of my own feelings clouding my views, but the two by Kasugai-san’s feet were not just elegant, but they seemed to also be pitiful.

“By the way what did you all come this deep into the mountains to do?” Kasugai-san said still with a lack of intonation. “It does not look like you came here to look at a familiar face nor that you came here to see how the Professor is doing.”

“Who knows,” I put both my hands in the air and feigned ignorance. “I just came along. You would have to ask Kunagisa herself, because I do not know.”

“I think trying to drag Utsurigi-san out of here is an impossible task.”

”…….”

I paused, with both of my hands up.

“The Professor’s obsession over Utsurigi-san is abnormal. Whatever that old man is thinking. And whatever I am to do.”

She said, and Kasugai-san turned her back to me, and looked far away. What lay down the path of her sight is, yes, the seventh ward. The research ward that houses Utsurigi Gaisuke.

”….. what research the Professor is doing, Kasugai-san does not know?”

I remembered what Kunagisa said earlier, and asked Kasugai-san.

“Research. Research…” Kasugai seemed to smile lightly at my choice of words. “Is that Professor actually doing research. Maybe he’s not doing any research. Because what Professor Kyouichirou’s doing is more like war than research. But I might not be able to answer if I were asked what sort of war that is.”

”….. huh?”

I did not understand, at all.

Kasugai-san turned her eyes back to me and said, “More importantly.”

“To be precise, I don’t know what I’m doing, that’s all. What am I doing here I think as I am being told to do absurd and unreasonable things every day every day without rest like the horse of a horse carriage.”

“You are.”

“I am,” Kasugai-san nodded deeply, in a sagely way. “I am. What in the world is that old man fixated on.”

”…….”

It seemed the topic was heading toward a rather unpleasant direction. Speaking of which, Shito-kun was pretty venomous toward Neo-san, but it seemed like Kasugai-san’s words toward Professor Kyouichirou were not filled with the same sort of malice. Yet it was not like she was complaining or whining. What is this, really.

“Dogs.”

Suddenly, Kasugai-san changed the topic.

“You like dogs?”

”….. not particularly. I do not like or hate. Dogs are animals, right?”

“Yes. There’s an urban legend that animals gravitate toward people who like animals. Considering they gravitate toward me that must be true.”

“Who knows. I have never studied animal psychology.”

“Mmm. Well this field is relatively minor even in the science crowd,” for some reason Kasugai-san smiled in a seductive way at me. I do not understand the meaning. “As a result I am locked up deep in the mountains like this.”

“Locked up…?”

“Oh dear what a slip of the tongue. How careless of me. It appears you have the ability to make

other people let down their guard. Anyways please forget what I said boy."

And then she returned to normal.

"Yes. It seems you have time so let's pass time talking."

Just as she said that, Kasugai-san gave some sort of order to the two dogs. They responded promptly, and one went behind Kasugai-san, and another went behind me, and then both *lay down*.

"No need to stand around have a seat boy."

Said Kasugai-san, and she really sat down on the back of the black dog. That enormous body was indeed a perfect fit to be a sofa, but it was a sight that probably would not rest well with animal rights activists.

"……"

I turned around, and the black dog behind me was glancing at me in an accusing way. Well, accuse me all you want, what am I supposed to do.

"What's wrong? Don't feel modest take a seat. It's fundamentally a wild animal so it's soft and comfortable. No worries, that child has a firm body. You don't particularly like dogs anyways right?"

"No, thank you for your concern, but unfortunately I have an illness where I die in two seconds if I sit on the back of a dog."

"Mmm. Suit yourself," Kasugai-san twirled her finger. In response, the dog that was behind me quickly stood up, and then walked to Kasugai-san's right. And Kasugai-san naturally leaned her elbow on it.

"Everyone seems to dislike this. I think it's the same as a feather blanket. I guess they're alright with if it's dead but not alright if it's alive."

"Well, I am simply just afraid of being bitten."

"Don't worry. These two haven't been experimented on yet so they're gentle. The other one is being experimented on right now so I can't guarantee safety though. Yes – to be honest I heard about you a number of times from Miyoshi-chan."

"Huh. That is a frigid thing to hear," that pervert, better not have said things that should not be told. Unfortunately I am not able to trust Kokoromi-sensei's loose lips as much as Suzunashi-san. "What sort of things did you hear? From my respected master?"

"Mostly nonsense. But from what I heard from Miyoshi-chan I can't help but feel like your current actions seem off. You're trying to help Utsurigi-san – help is the right word I hope – and came all the

way here but you're not the type of kid do to that right?"

"That is a rather frank rudeness… despite my appearances I am pretty active, you know? I write a poem in my journal every day," I shrugged my shoulders. "However, with regards to *all the way here*, it is as you say. I do not care in the least about helping Utsurigi-san. Kunagisa is the only one thinking that, and Suzunashi-san is intending on staying a neutral party to all of this, and for my part to be direct I really do not care."

"Mmhmm."

"And I just did a rescue mission like this last month. It is one thing if I am to rescue a cute girl, but I do not have the intent to do anything wild in order to help a middle-aged man. I intend to just be an observer, this time."

"Observer. A good word."

Kasugai-san smiled. Completely unlike Kokoromi-sensei, her smile had the full seductive beauty of an adult woman.

"Observer is a good word. Probably the most good of words. Good words never disappear."

Those words spoken lyrically by Kasugai-san stuck with me, but I also felt like some famous foreign movie may be the source material.

"Hey boy. Neo-san and Koutari-san and also Miyoshi-chan all seem convinced that you're Kunagisa Tomo's lover but that's not actually the case right?"

"I finally meet someone who says that," I shrugged my shoulders. "The people here, they all open their mouths and immediately lover this lover that – it was unbearable, honestly. Not just the people here, it seems like most people."

"I don't blame them. When a boy and girl of age are that friendly everyone looks at them through that sort of lens."

"Of age… if you want to go there, Kunagisa's mental maturity is too young, and mine is too old."

"Old. Miyoshi-chan said *his mental maturity is stuck as a middle school sophomore*."

Middle school sophomore – thirteen-years old.

The age that I met Kunagisa Tomo?

Six years ago.

"……"

"But still lovers. A distasteful word. Lovers is a distasteful word. Probably the most distasteful of

words. Distasteful words never disappear."

This time it was arranged so that it would be hard to guess the source material.

"It felt like an allotment. Not that I'm saying allotments are bad. What do you think of allotments? Do you support love?"

"Who knows? I have never once liked someone."

"A common line. However well smart people are not well-suited for love for many reasons. It is like a cul de sac of evolution. In that sense I think Professor Kyouichirou is amazing."

"– in what way?"

"At its core talent isn't mass produced. If anything it's destructive. You understand being that you were in the ER3 System – geniuses who leave their name in history generally shine their genius in their tens or twenties and then they're done."

"Yes – well, yes."

There were plenty of esteemed people who were recorded in history in their senior appearances; however, the time they could be called a *genius* pure to the word was until they were around thirty, and afterwards they lived off the experience of being a *genius* – in other words, they live the rest of their lives using the leftover crumbs of their genius. It is not that there are no examples of someone spending their whole entire life being a *genius*, but in those cases they simply died young.

The reason why Kunagisa Tomo and Shadou Kyouichirou do not mesh well may be because of that. The conversation with Suzunashi-san on the second floor of the first research ward – I thought of the *difference in generations*. One who was once a *genius* and one who is currently a *genius* – that difference is decisive.

The professor who is shown the genius he once was.

Kunagisa who shows genius that will one day be lost.

Just by living in different eras, is this much difference created between the same ilk?

If so – the man positioned in the middle.

How about, Utsurigi Gaisuke.

Is he right now a *genius*?

Or is he a *once was a genius*?

"However despite his age the Professor continues to try to produce. Even if that is production

born out of destruction it is still incredible."

"But even so–"

I almost let slip what Kunagisa had talked about earlier as a retort, but I managed to hold myself back at the last instant. Smiling slightly at my reaction, Kasugai-san tilted her head to the side and said, "mmm this time we both were about to slip our tongues." She remained as refined as ever.

"It seems we'd be able to enjoy a conversation better without going there so let's return to the topic. It's fine that we both agree that you and the Kunagisa girl are not lovers but," Kasugai-san continued speaking without pausing. "It looks like you and the Kunagisa girl are not particularly friends either. Because I think that is my deduction incorrect?"

"What a strong opinion… but it would depend on the definition of friend, that."

"Probably. It was a foolish question to ask without defining," Kasugai-san nodded slightly. "However to begin with life doesn't give you that many options anyways. There're probably six options at the most. Like hate normal – and maybe three more something."

"Pleasant and unpleasant and indifferent."

"My. You're good with words. But that ends up being like rolling a die [3]. That's why destined lovers and such are all just sleight of minds. Not that I'd say everything is coincidence or happenstance."

"I agree about that, for the most part."

"My my we think alike. I'm a wee bit surprised. But perhaps this is also coincidence?"

"Who knows… even if it is a coincidence, this is not a bad coincidence."

"Not bad. I might be happy if you're saying that honestly," Kasugai-san lightly chuckled. "Six options. I said that without thinking but it has quite the flavor and oddity."

"….. however, I do not have six options. If I think about it I, from birth to now, feel like I have never once chosen."

"That might be the same as I."

Kasugai-san said almost immediately. I looked at her but with doubt, but she still had a plain expression, as if she thought nothing of it.

"Yes. Even in the case that we presume there're only six options no matter what there exists a seventh. Because I think no matter what the options are you always have the option to *not choose*."

"Choose to not choose… how psychological (contradictory paradox)."

"Yes. I hate choosing and deciding. Given what Miyoshi-chan said and what I heard earlier it's probably that. You might be the same way maybe."

"Indeed, I do have that sort of aspect to me," I confirmed Kasugai-san's inquiry. "To be honest, that is the easiest."

Yes, Kasugai-san nodded.

To not choose.

To not select.

What Professor Kyouichirou's secretary Misachi-san said to me – *I prefer to have no opinion*, that line may be fitting for myself and Kasugai-san.

"Right. I think so too – oh, dear," Kasugai-san stopped abruptly and then stood up from the back of the dog. "– rain."

Told that, I looked up. It seemed the boredom level of the rain clouds had finally reached its limit. Droplets that could be expressed as a drizzle fell through the cracks in the sky. Kasugai-san petted the back of the two dogs one at a time in order.

"It wouldn't be good if these kids caught a cold so I'm going back to my research ward before it starts pouring. There's still a mountain of extremely impossible work left for me to do after all."

"Sounds tough."

"Work must be tough I think. Whether you want to do it or you don't want to do it. You think so too don't you?"

Kasugai-san said, and then she took a step closer. I thought she might be wanting another handshake, but it seemed not, as she took another two steps closer, and then held my head firm with both of her hands. And then she stared at me.

"…..? Kasugai-san? Wha-"

-t is the matter, I wanted to say, but then Kasugai-san stuck out a tongue so long that it did not seem to suit her small mouth, and then with that tongue she **licked** my cheek. The warm, raw living feeling connected directly with my brain.

"…..!"

I instinctively, in a flurry of action that could be called violent, flung Kasugai-san away, and then jumped back about three meters.

"What. Are. You. Doing. Suddenly."

"….. you said you did not mind if a dog did it so I wondered how about a person."

"I absolutely and positively mind."

"I see. Well sorry. I apologize," Kasugai-san apologized nonchalantly. "It's been a while since I met a boy so I couldn't help myself."

Could not help herself what.

"Boy. I might as well ask you now."

"What…"

"Would you like to carry yourself on those two legs to my research ward with me and then into my bedroom and have sex?"

"….. please do not might as well ask such a crazy thing."

"Is it crazy?"

"It is crazy."

"No?"

"No."

"Even if I agree to any sort of play you want?"

"……."

No, I am not actually pondering that?

However I see, the reason why her enunciation was so clear despite her lack of intonation must have been because of that long tongue. Thinking this would be really bad if this were a precursor to something else, I said, "there are plenty of other men around."

"Like Koutari-san, or Neo-san."

"Someone with long hair and someone who's fat don't count I think."

Princess Kasugai nonchalantly said something brutal.

"Then how about Shito-kun? That young boy is like fresh fruit, ripe for picking."

I tried redirecting.

"Hmmmm. Uze-chan already put her hands on him."

He was already taken.

"Then Utsurigi-san. He is a pretty good man."

"Really?" Kasugai-san tilted her head, her interest seemingly piqued. "Utsurigi-san never leaves

his research ward so I've never seen him. Of course I've seen the fruits of his research through mail and such and I've felt awed and inspired by them but I'm not perverted enough to sexual lust over information."

I thought that at the point she tried to lay her hands on a minor she had met for the first time she was already perverted barely, or already barely perverted, but I did not say that.

Hmm, Kasugai-san, she did not seem the way she looked. I thought perhaps people who study too much all end up crazy in some way, but I did not say that either.

"Well think about it anyways please. Well then you should hurry back quickly. It wouldn't be good if your body broke down this deep in the mountains. I specialize in animals and Miyoshi-chan specializes in humans but only dead ones, you know. Bye bye."

Kasugai-san bowed her head, and then began walking toward the fourth ward. The two black dogs followed behind her like familiars. It looked not like a walk but more like them being bodyguards, I absent-mindedly thought. I rubbed at the cheek that was licked, and saw off Kasugai-san.

"Hurry back quickly…"

Did that mean to return to the inn, or did that mean return all the way home. The me of now could not determine which. This me, who did not comprehend even one percent of the vastness of this Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility, could not determine which.

Gradually my clothes began to dampen with water. In any case, I need now return to the inn, and I turned on my heel and headed toward the dense forest.

"However, I did not think I would meet Kasugai-san," I spoke to myself while walking through the forest, which was already beginning to look eerie – come to think of it, if I had been gone an hour it would be around three in the morning. "Perhaps this is one type of coincidence…"

The once comrade of Dead Blue, Green Green Green, no matter the reason was working at none other than the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility that just so happened to be funded by the Kunagisa household, and accompanying that Kunagisa Tomo as a friend on the journey was me, and my instructor Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei was working at that research facility as a fellow. Speaking of which, by the time we arrived at this laboratory it was evening, and it had not been even six hours since arriving, that after meeting Kasugai-san just now, I had finished meeting with every face within the facility.

Truly, why do I gravitate toward misfortune.

"….. ahh, I remember now."

My feet stopped, and I froze in the middle of walking under the drizzle.

"That is right… I have not actually met **everyone within the facility** yet….."

One more.

One more, there is a **possibility** that there is another person within this facility. I do not know what sort of number that probability may be, but if there is any possibility whatsoever, then I am not able to not move. If there is any probability, even if that would be mathematically the equivalent of zero, it does not matter to me.

In the first place, why I left the inn at this hour. It was not just because I was unable to sleep. To meet Kasugai-san? Nonsense. I am not superhuman enough to predict such a coincidence.

Yes.

I left the inn to **confirm**. I remembered that there was one more element of turbulence, and I had stepped outside to confirm that I was not just guessing wrong.

"– now then," I slowly closed my eyes, and then opened my eyes. "Is it the second coming of the human failure…..?"

That **thing** I felt while we were walking to the seventh ward to meet Utsurigi. I still feel it. I still feel it digging into my back. That humid feeling, of being watched from somewhere far away, of being observed from somewhere far away, from being peeped upon from somewhere far away, of being watched over from somewhere far away, that sort of disgusting, unidentifiable feeling. No, it cannot even be called a feeling, as it is more like a muddy, muddy mood.

That is a look.

"**Come out… *Mr. Intruder*.** Or should I call you Zerozaki Itoshiki?" I mumbled. "If you keep running and hiding like that, your manliness will go down."

"I never particularly bother with **sneaking, running or hiding**."

Right behind me.

In the literal sense, **she** was right behind me. A few millimeters, no, a few microns was the distance, as she stood behind me. She existed right behind me, in that incredibly small space where I still would not hear her breath or even the beating of her heart.

"…..——"

This – this close.

To not realize even when she was in a position of such closeness that she definitively controlled my life or death. I was hoping to surprise her by suddenly calling out *you looking at me, wherever you are*, but it felt like my heart had just been gouged out in return. I could not jump away, or even turn around. Or even, I was so stunned that my body locked up. To confirm her appearance, basically all I could do was wait for her to walk all the way around in front of me.

Denim pants and leather, laced boots that seemed too cool for a lady to wear. She had a rough shirt covering her upper body. And then above them, she wore a denim jacket that seemed to be made of the same material as her pants that also had long sleeves. She had long hair, and they were braided on both sides of her head. Presumably her glasses served no actual function, and of course a denim hunting cap. The cap was too deep, and so I could not see her eyes.

My body trembled. No, my body did not even tremble. There was not even a will to fight. There was not even any fear. There was no shock or confusion or terror. I was terribly calm. I was forced to be terribly calm. This feeling, this feeling of déjà vu. This feeling, of opposing that Mankind's Strongest.

The rain began falling heavier and heavier. It was becoming difficult to confirm what lay ahead of me. It seemed it was beginning to pour. But that did not matter right now. Such a thing was completely irrelevant to the current situation. Compared to this feeling, if it were to continue raining like this forever, it would still be a trivial problem.

"*Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility–" she spoke first, with a light tone of voice that was ill-suited to the setting. "– in any case, the condition of this place is just like that of a graveyard to which the dead flock."

"……"

"Do you not think that there are few things as unbecoming as the dreams of an elder? Do you not think that the sight of an elder who's envious of a mere child is one that screams of patheticness? Like an apparition that clings to the world after death – so unseemly and pathetic and sad and wretched and self-interested and pitiful and piddling and pitiable that I cannot stand to watch."

"……"

I could not react. I was completely smothered.

And to my state, she smiled and said, "Yet however, this rain is well is it not?" and then pulled her brim back down over her eyes, and then like a forest faerie – creepily laughed.

"As though it hints at the path you will take, what a fantastic rain. Fufu, this is itself consummate."

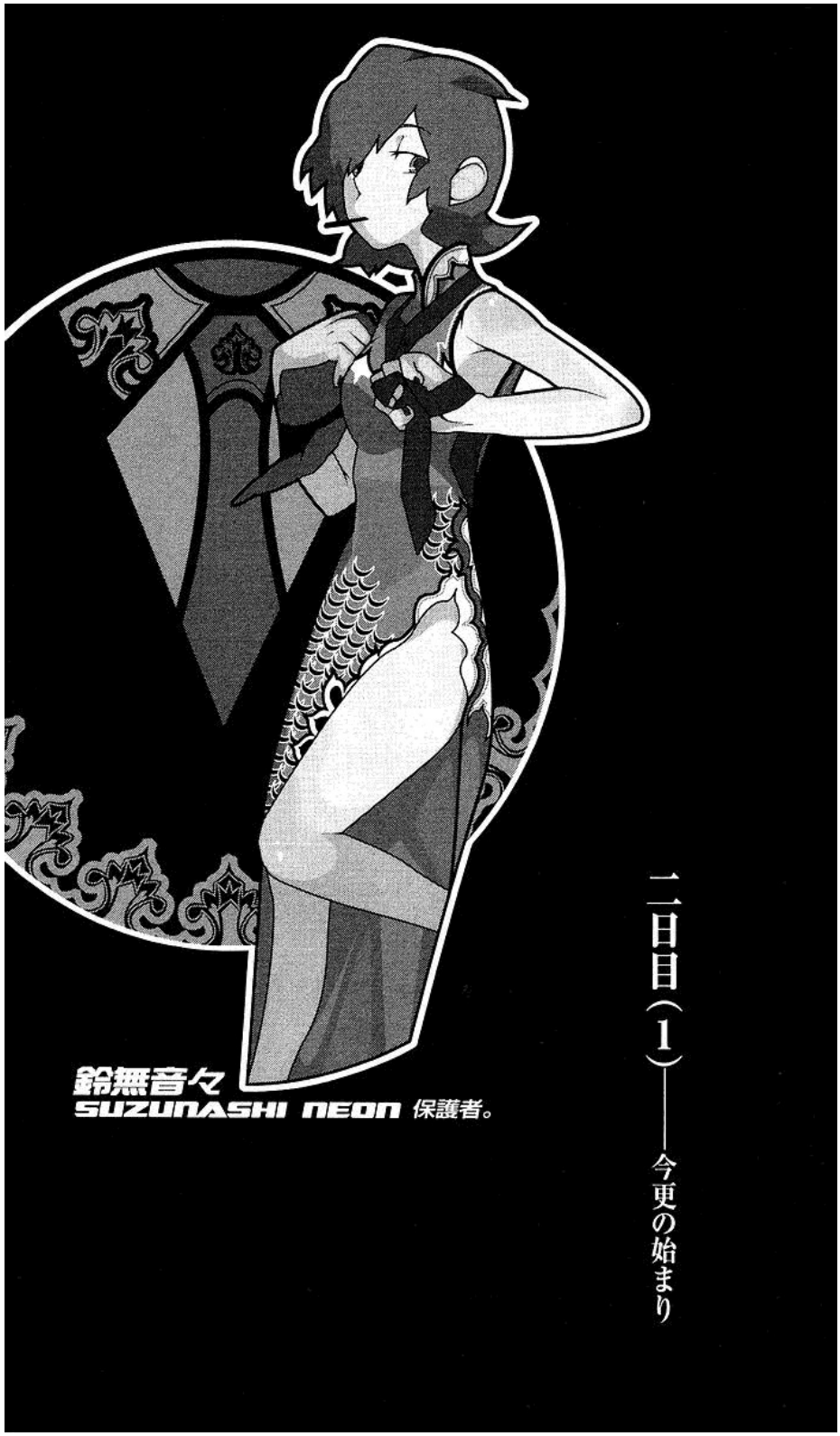
”– you,”

“I present to you my real name, Ishimaru Kouta – pleased to be your acquaintance, from thenceforth.”

[1)] Super Abnormal Human Construct Research

[2)] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seppuku

[3)] note that a die in Japanese is サイコロ or saikoro. Say that aloud, then look back at the title of this volume/arc again.



二日目（1）——今更の始まり

Day 2 (1)

The Beginning, Belatedly

0

The way a person looks is not the way they are.

The way a person looks is just the way they are selected.

1

It appeared it stopped raining while I was sleeping.

Six o'clock in the morning.

There were still a lot of clouds in the sky, and the sun coming up was iffy. However, at the very least there was enough light to be able to make out the horizon with my naked eye. I was standing on the roof of the inn, alone, and letting the wind have its way with me. It sounded cool to say that I was letting the wind have its way with me, but the reality was that I was just slowly letting my drowsiness escape.

There were a number of puddles on the tiled roof. I nonsensically tried stepping in one. Obviously, water splashed every which way. My shoes and pant sleeves became wet. I looked at that for a bit, but eventually I grew bored, and lifted my foot from the puddle.

"– die."

I mumbled, and suddenly, with my left hand, I pulled out the knife from the hidden holster in my jacket. The thin, really so thin that you would think you could see through it, knife that a doctor might even use for tiny surgeries. Just swinging it lightly gave me the delusion of cutting air.

I continued to swing a second, third time. This was an imitation of Miiko-san, something like a multi-directional swing. There was nothing in particular for me to cut, but just swinging the blade gave me the refreshing feeling of clearing up something in my heart.

”– wow, Aikawa-san,” I stopped and mumbled. “This blade is really something.”

Did even that human failure have a blade like this. It may be difficult to land a fatal wound given that it is a knife with a short blade, but this lightness, and this ease of use was a marvel of its own sort. It was like a contemporary version of ornamental knives. Come to think of it, it was the first time I had actually swung it since Aikawa-san had given it to me as a present, but I thought it might indeed come in handy if such a situation were to arise, and I nodded to myself, and tried to return the knife to the holster.

And, then, I came to the thought that there was no need to use the knife with my left hand. I am not left-handed nor right-handed. If I must compare, my left arm simply has a bit more strength. However, because the strength of the knife is its quickness, there was no need to use it with my left hand. In fact, perhaps the knife should be used in my right hand as a support? There are more right-handed people, after all. As such, the fact that the knife pocket in the holster was designed for left-handed use, and that it was intended to be placed on the right side of my body, would prove that this knife was designed for that role, would it not?

Knives – well, not just knives, but any weapon, when held, draw peoples’ attention. This is of course the case for the one being attacked, but it is the same for the attacker. If you flip that around, it means that people think if you handle the weapon then you are safe.

What I speak of is variation.

This knife is splendid, but it would be bad to rely on it. I thought that, and took off my jacket, flipped the holster, placed the knife back in, and then put the jacket back on.

”– either way, this is still just to make myself feel better…..”

Or perhaps for recreation.

I cannot deny that there is a bit of self-deprecation in that admission. The abnormality of this research facility was already enough to dampen my mood, but to add to that, there was Miyoshi Kokoromi-sensei, and then and then, Ishimaru Kouta…..

Hmm, Ishimaru Kouta…..

To be honest, when I accepted the knife from Aikawa-san, I thought there would not be an occasion to need it, and even if there were to be such an occasion, I thought it would still be useless in my hands, but, maybe it was still better to have it around to make myself feel better than to not have it at all.

”– quite a dangerous hobby, Inoji. Instead of a Fallen Indulgence, are you going for a Bladed

Indulgence?"

Suddenly, a voice spoke to me from behind, and I turned around in surprise. I figured who it was based on voice and way of talking, but in any case there was Suzunashi-san. She had apparently still not changed, and was still wearing a china dress. Perhaps she had just awakened, as she had black-framed glasses on instead of contact lenses.

"….. good morning, Suzunashi-san. You were awake?"

"I've been friends with the sun since I was born. I wake up pretty early, you know. Yes, good morning, Inoji," Suzunashi-san smiled somewhat sarcastically. "Knife-training in the morning? Are you trying to get into some foreign force? Inoji, I can introduce you to some people, if you want."

"I will pass," I moved toward the fence around the roof, as if escaping from Suzunashi-san. "I just wanted to move around a bit. Morning exercise is important. You know, I am almost twenty, right? I need to get a workout before the exhaustion built-up over my teen years catches up to me."

"I can help out if you want to train. I can be a sparring partner, too," Suzunashi-san said, appearing to not be joking. "So? Where's Ao-chan?"

"….. it is not like we are always a set. Although it seems everyone misunderstands. You know, Kunagisa is usually cooped up, right? And on top of that she lives in Shirosaki. We actually have a low encounter rate."

"Well, yeah, when it comes to encounter rates you probably run into Asano way more often. Being neighbors and all."

Suzunashi-san said that and then stretched. Based on that, it appeared she had not come to the roof because of me, but rather simply because she wanted to exercise and stretch herself.

After completing a set of flexibility exercises, Suzunashi-san began smoking. And then she said, "Hey, Inoji."

"I read an interesting book when I was being an elementary school student. I've read countless books in my life, but that was the only book I ever found interesting."

"Huh. What sort of book?"

"Yes. If you're asking what was interesting, it was a mystery novel, but despite having about five hundred pages, the latter half of it was blank. I was surprised, I didn't see that twist coming."

"It was a misprint."

"But it was interesting. It was really surprising," Suzunashi-san took out a lighter and then lit the

cigarette. She made it look really cool, but her china dress ruined the cool-ness. "….. but that goes for movies, too, not just books. If you know its length is two hours, then you can always deduce where you are in the movie. If you're one hour into the movie, you're at around the one-hour mark, but if you're in the last five minutes you're probably watching the climax. There's a level of comfort there. A movie ending short wouldn't happen unless it's a broken film or something."

"So are you trying to get at… life is different, Suzunashi-san?"

"Close, but not exactly."

Suzunashi-san offered me a cigarette and asked, "Smoke?" but I shook my head and declined.

"In other words… for example, if you're watching a Hollywood movie, and the heroine actress doesn't show up an hour into the film, or there's no hijacking or building hijacking, or aliens or anything, do you think that'd ever happen?"

"Never."

"Reading a mystery novel, and you finish reading half the pages but no one's killed, and the detective hasn't even shown up yet, would you be able to call that a mystery novel?"

"Never."

"But in that sense, life is different," Suzunashi-san repeated my line. "**Something should be happening soon**, or, **things should be wrapping up soon**, or, that sort of premonition… or more like, measurement doesn't exist. So, now that we've gotten to that point, I'll get to the point I wanted to get to, which is, Inoji. What are you intending to do with Ao-chan?"

"….. intending to do? What do you mean? That is rather abrupt," I tilted my head to the side, acting like I did not understand what was meant. "I have no intentions or anything of the sort."

"You have university and yet you tagged along all the way over here, and picked a fight with Sir Utsurigi and Sir Kyouichirou… what are you doing?"

"That is a very fundamental question, but I do not know that either. I do not even want to think about what I am doing. Or, Suzunashi-san, are you able to put a reason to everything you do?"

"I may not be able to put a reason but I'm also not being paradoxical. Don't mistake reason and paradox, Inoji. Hahah, perhaps that was a difficult way to put it? ….. Inoji, I can't believe that a boy wouldn't want to hug the girl he likes if she's right there in front of him."

"……"

I could not even back-channel at Suzunashi-san's words.

“Of course, that’s your own business, Inoji, but your life isn’t continuing forever. I think you should let other people take care of things sometimes. Otherwise you’ll miss out on a lot.”

”….. you make it sound like I am distrustful of people.”

“You are. Absolutely distrustful. You’ve never once believed someone, have you? But you know, for example, Inoji, I like you. Asano too, can’t help but find you cute. That’s why she came to me and begged me to chaperon you two. I don’t think it needs to be stated that Ao-chan, too, loves Inoji. You understand that at least, don’t you?”

“Shito-kun and Utsurigi also… like and hate and such, we are not children you know.”

I know I should not even be retorting. I know that Suzunashi-san is correct. However I could not help but retort. No, this was not even a retort, it was just – exactly, like a sulking a child.

“Just because they like the other person, where is the guarantee that they would never betray them? It is not that hard to become friends with someone you hate. Really, can you stop with that? Always talking about liking and hating just leads to unpleasantness.”

“It’s not food, so I think it’s fine to talk about liking and hating, I think.”

“It is the same as food. Human relations. People who are sensible about it find it delicious.”

“I can’t believe you actually think that,” Suzunashi-san did not fall for the taunt. With correctness, as if dealing with a combative child, she spoke to me slowly. “Just a thought, but have you ever spat out how you actually feel in your life? Umm. That, was it called nonsense or something?”

”…….”

“I think – you can, say what you want, a bit more, don’t you think?”

”….. I will say nothing. I am a silent character, after all.”

“If you want. Is that so is that so. I see, so that’s your defensive wall. Or perhaps just your last shred of pride? Then what a cheap wall of pride. You might be thinking that you’re tricking people with that, but actually you look pretty silly, just so you know.”

“Can you please just let it go,” I kept my eyes off Suzunashi-san as I spoke. “I am not in the mood to listen to Suzunashi-san’s lectures. My stomach is quite full, thank you. So much so that if I were to lean one way I would probably start leaking it all over the place. There is a lot for me to think about.”

“A lot, eh… like Ao-chan, like yourself, like Ao-chan, like yourself, I assume?”

“Is that wrong?”

“I won’t say it’s wrong. I just won’t say it, but I do think it’s wrong. And you know, you should take

a look outside for once, you know? The way you are now, you're just like the researchers here."

"What do you mean?"

"Putting up a wall all around like this, and no one knows what they're doing inside. You know, Inoji. I'll be honest, we – by which I mean us ordinary people that aren't any special species like you and Ao-chan, and Professor Kyouichirou and Sir Utsurigi, we're scared of **things that we don't know**. Because, we don't know."

Scared of things that are unknown.

The fear that Professor Kyouichirou holds with regards to Kunagisa – does that fall under that?

"….. it is a survival instinct to fear the unknown. That is nothing to fret over."

"But you like **things that you don't know**, right? You absolutely love situations that aren't clear, that're vague and half-assed, don't you?"

Attracted to the unknown.

The worship that Utsurigi Gaisuke holds with regards to Kunagisa – does that fall under that?

"I am not particularly… anything like that."

"You should try to get better at lying. You might be able to dupe other people, but that doesn't work on me."

"Monks-in-training say different things."

"I'm already a monk. I don't need to do training, because there's no need. Anyways, you like the vague unknown. That's probably why you're placing yourself in such a vague position… but you know, even if it's just a little, don't you think you could tag along with us?"

"I have been doing so," I said. "But you know, I have limits, too. It seems like everyone and anyone harbors some sort of expectations from me, and of course I would love to meet their expectations, too, but I cannot meet expectations if I lack the capability. So to have someone say *you failed my expectations* is nothing but bothersome."

"What really is that half-hearted desire to interact with people?" Suzunashi-san suddenly said. "Hating people yet still wanting to be by people, goes beyond the selfishness of people who can meld into society, I think anyways."

"– what?"

"If you really think they're annoying, you can just become a mountain hermit like me. It'd be easy for you wouldn't it? You'd be able to live just fine alone. Pessimists should just be as pessimistic as a

pessimist, and go away somewhere. Don't think of me as cold just because I say that, though. But, people who can live alone, might as well live alone. Strong people all do that, you know?"

"Is that why you do not see strong people very often. An amusing theory. Quite a leap, but not paradoxical, I see, amusing," I nodded with contempt. "However, I am a weak person. I am a coward that hates people."

"Inoji. For crying out loud, can you stop with that?"

Suzunashi-san slid past my words.

"– what do you mean by, stop with that?"

"Making it sound like you're faulty and that no one else is. What's the merit in acting like you're incapable? Do you enjoy self-deprecation? I don't like that way of thought, either. Inoji, I'm tired of talking about this, so come here."

"What are you going to do?"

"Punch you."

There is no idiot that would hear that and walk over. I stood in place, and put up both my hands as an answer to Suzunashi-san. She saw that and then said, "Alright, alright."

"I won't punch you, so come over here."

I heard that, felt relieved, and walked over.

She punched me.

"….. that hurt."

"Punch things that're broken to fix them."

"My head hurts from all the things to think about already… please spare me."

"Mmhmm. Your head hurts?"

She pulled my hair.

"Don't worry. It's just a scratch."

"……"

"Here."

Suzunashi-san said as she let go of me, and then punched my cheek again. It was not that strong of a punch. I staggered back two or three steps, and then stopped.

"At the very least, you don't seem that weak to me."

"….. what you think of me is your own business."

"That's why I'm saying what I please. You can live alone. You're strong enough. You're strong enough at least to not need to cling to others. ….. but, on the other hand, there's an actual problem, which is that I think you could get along with people better than you do now, you know? You said *I have been doing so* just now, but – you know the truth, don't you? About that sort of stuff."

"……"

"It just looks to me like you're failing on purpose."

In April, surrounded by geniuses.

In May, tagging along with classmates.

In June, confronting a high school girl.

Every time, I failed.

But were those failures really unavoidable? Or perhaps had I actually known everything, and despite all that, chosen the wrong path?

Afraid of success, afraid of triumph.

And then, July.

In the *Mad Demon* Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility–

Do I intend to fail?

"….. I am going to wake Kunagisa up."

I said, and then turned my back on Suzunashi-san, as if escaping. Suzunashi-san did not stop me. She probably thought it was enough. And that was, the way it was.

It was enough, of gouging through me.

"Jeez….."

That person really loves lecturing. However, they say I am a masochist who loves being lectured, so that may be more of an issue.

I arrived at Kunagisa's room, and knocked on the door. However, there was no response. She was probably still asleep. Last night she slept fairly early (for Kunagisa), but she was probably tired from the long trip. Kunagisa did not have much stamina.

I opened the door without making a sound and entered the room. As expected, Kunagisa was sleeping on top of the bed. She had terrible sleeping form, and half of the blanket had fallen off the bed. She was sleeping with a carefree face, with an expression of complete defenselessness. I

thought, what a truly happy person.

A happy person.

A happy person.

However, is she happy?

I walked to the side of the bed, and crouched. I carefully extended by hand, and touched Kunagisa's blue hair. It was an action that did not particularly have meaning, but in any case, I did that. And then I played with the hair for a bit, and then, moved my fingers to Kunagisa's cheek.

"….. come to think of it, Utsurigi had said something similar about me."

However.

However, Suzunashi-san.

You do not know everything about me. What sort of *secrets that cannot be told* I carry, she does not know. How twisted a person I am, how abysmally sinful a person I am, she does not know. I do not want to be lectured by someone who does not know, and I do not want people to know anyways.

After all, what I do not trust is not other people, it is myself.

"Truly a melancholy… I am. Gosh, is this guy alright…"

I mumbled, as if I were someone else, and then I moved my fingers to Kunagisa's lips. I turned my fingers, as if caressing the lips. And then after thinking something, I moved my hands, this time, to her throat. I touched the maxillary artery, and felt the beat of Kunagisa Tomo's life, and then.

And then, I slapped Kunagisa's cheek.

"Uni…? Nini," Kunagisa seemed to have awakened. "….. huh. Ii-chan. Ukh? ….. mornink."

"Mornink."

I slapped Kunagisa's cheek once more, and said, "it's morning."

"Huh… already? I feel like I only slept five minutes," Kunagisa rubbed her eyes. "That's odd. I feel like I haven't slept at all lately."

"Your exhaustion is probably catching up. Because you keep forcing your crummy body to work. Want to go on a trip somewhere once, without needing to do anything? Like a vacation, right, like over to Mongolia. Not a violent place like this."

"That might be a good idea… but I'd never do it, because it sounds tiring."

Kunagisa slid off the bed and said "tie my hair." I nodded, and pulled off the black rubber band

around my wrist, and began gathering Kunagisa's somewhat long hair together. Her hair had grown longer since we had reunited, though I do not know if Kunagisa ever cuts her hair.

"Tomo, do you not cut your hair?"

"Mmm. If I do, Ii-chan wouldn't be able to tie my hair anymore. That'd be lonely," Kunagisa puckered her lips and said. "But it'll get really hot soon."

"Your room always has air conditioning running…" I said, and then remembered. "Speaking of which, Professor Kyouichirou and the Utsurigi guy both mentioned it, but did you change your hairstyle?"

"Hmm? Ahh, yeah. I did."

"Hmm…"

Kunagisa met Professor Kyouichirou seven years ago. And she last saw Utsurigi two years ago. However, when I met her again, Kunagisa had seemed the same as she had always been. Then, what sort of journey had Kunagisa's hairstyle taken?

"Alright. Ponytail done."

"Thanku. Is boku-sama-chan cute?"

"Cute, cute."

"Fall in love again?"

"Fall in love again, fall in love again."

"Boku-sama-chan love?"

"Love love."

I answered twice each, and then said, "Alright, shall we have breakfast?"

"Let's eat first and then think of some ideas."

"Right," Kunagisa nodded, and she stood up. "Yup. And about which to persuade–"

"Which?" I asked back. "Do you mean, which of Utsurigi or Professor Kyouichirou?"

"Yup. Because problems need to be solved one at a time, in any case. Which do you think would be easier to persuade, Ii-chan?"

A difficult question. I felt like both were the same sort of problem, yet I also felt like they were completely different. I thought for a while, and then answered, "From a simplicity standpoint, Professor Kyouichirou, probably."

"That Utsurugi looks like he takes things lightly, but he is quite stubborn. Or perhaps less stubborn and more selfish. He might put up a good fight with you for who is more selfish. You both only do what you think, and only say what you think. You both act like nothing other than yourself matters. I do not know why he is so obstinate about this, but in that sense I feel like Professor Kyouichirou might have more room for discussion?"

"Well you're right about Sacchan, aside from the point about boku-sama-chan being selfish. Ii-chan's gotten better at evaluating people. But Ii-chan, that's still just an *if push comes to shove* standpoint, because I think Professor Kyouichirou isn't that simple, either. Remember what I said last night? The masterpiece that one esteemed scientist has built-up over an entire, proud, life – maybe masterpiece would be overstating it, but leaving that aside I think trying to get someone to bend their…"

"I did not mean from just a relative, comparative point. There is a way. A way that would reach Professor Kyouichirou but would not reach Utsurigi. For example, right, you could ask Nao-san."

"Ahh… I see," Kunagisa nodded after a pause. "I see….. cut off the financial root? Then of course the Professor would have to release Sacchan… is that what you mean?"

"You do not need to be that overt. You just need to threaten. That would be effective enough, would it not?"

After all, allowing three outsiders into a facility where such secretive work is being performed would normally never be allowed. Even so, that the Professor allowed Kunagisa's **invasion** also expressed the Professor's fear of the Kunagisa house, I thought.

Of course, it would be impossible to cut off funding for this research laboratory just by asking Nao-san – Kunagisa Nao. That was coming from a large stream that I would not be able to even imagine, and even the secretary of the CEO, Nao-san, would not be able to do anything about it, and Nao-san is not a kind-enough person to bring his own emotions into work anyways. I am not calling him heartless, but he was not one that felt much attachment to anything.

However, this sort of threat is one that is **effective only because it will never be done**.

"There are other means without borrowing Nao-san's power. Chii-kun – well no, he is on bad terms with Utsurigi so that would not work. Let us assume that Hii-chan would be impossible, too. Even so, *Cracking* is not just Utsurigi's field of expertise, right? You could do it too if you wanted, like you used to, right? Then you could threaten something like you would *destroy the results of this research facility if Utsurigi Gaisuke is not* ***fired***. That would work, too. Given the content of research,

there is probably a network connection to this facility despite its location in the mountains, after all. A small – no, no matter the size, the Professor probably knows full well that a wall is meaningless in front of *Team*."

"Hmm. I see….. but those all sound pretty underhanded."

"Not up for it?"

"Nope, that's not what I mean. I just thought Ii-chan wasn't the type to bring that stuff up."

"I am underhanded. Fundamentally," I lightly nodded. "You should have known that from long ago, right?"

"That's not what I mean. I meant it's rare for Ii-chan to show that underhanded side to boku-sama-chan."

"Huh… really."

"Did something happen last night?"

Kunagisa asked me while looking at me not with an accusing look but more of a blank look. She was very astute in times of astuteness. And that was made worse by the lack of any logic to it. I shook my head and said, "Not really."

"However, I have university and part-time work, so I just want to get this over as smoothly and quickly as possible. That is all. That is all and everything."

"Hmm. Sounds like a lie," Kunagisa gave me a suspicious, peering look. "Ii-chan lies like breathing. Friends that you can't believe when you want to believe them are such a pain."

"Really. I am not lying."

"Whatever, anyways. I'll believe Ii-chan even if it's a lie."

"….. well, in any case those were ultimatums….. or more like last resorts. We would have to confront the Professor head on before relying on the Kunagisa household or former *Team* members, after all. Tactically, I would not be able to call it sound."

And the biggest problem would be whether it would be possible to out-bluff Professor Kyouichirou anyways. Kunagisa being Kunagisa is useless when it comes to negotiations and compromising, just an obstacle that is useless in every way. In that case, the task would fall on the User of Nonsense, but in this case the wild cards I hold are too few. It would be like trying to bluff without exchanging any cards against someone with a Full House. Even the most favorable of estimates would give me a thirty-five percent chance of winning. In other words, it would be like the

best of major league batters. From that perspective it would sound like it was not that bad of an odd, but realistically, no one would ever charge into a conflict with those odds.

"Yup. Let's talk to Neon-chan about that stuff, too."

"Sounds good."

I placed a hand on Kunagisa, and then left her room. I went straight to Suzunashi-san's room, but when I opened the door after knocking, I was surprised by what I saw.

There were three people in the room.

One was of course Suzunashi-san. She had already changed out of her china dress and back into her dark suit. It seemed she had also swapped the glasses for contact lenses. She was leaning against the wall with a troubled expression.

One of the other two I recognize. However, it was still an unexpected face to see here – it was Neo-san who was sitting on the bed. However right now, he did not have that mocking feel to him, as he also had a troubled expression.

"…..?"

And the other, this was a face I had never seen before. Bald… or rather, a complete skin-head, with black sunglasses that seem more fitting in a Chinese mafia movie. He had a handsome face but his hairstyle (for lack of a better word) and complete lack of facial expression was enough to cause me to become wary. He was somewhat tall. His posture was like an actor in a historical drama. Given that he was wearing a lab coat, he must be a researcher, however…

"….. huh…?"

I had already met with every researcher last night. Then who is this bald man? Who in the world is he? Assuming there is no mistake in Chii-kun's information. Who is this man naturally sitting next to Neo-san.

"Good morning."

It was Neo-san who greeted me as I stood at the door.

"Were you able to sleep well last night?"

"….. yes…. although I would not say it was the most comforting," I hesitantly nodded. "– well, enough so that I would not cause worry."

"That is good. And, at a good time–" fufu, Neo-san chuckled. However that was not said with that mocking tone, but rather an unshakably heavy tone. "I was about to call you just now. Right, Koutari-

san?"

"I don't know."

The mysterious handsome that answered curtly.

Wait, just now, Neo-san–

"Koutari-san?"

I could not help but point. That mysterious handsome looked at that with displeasure, and said, "Yes."

"What. Something about me?"

"….."

I took a step back. And then I ran into Kunagisa, who was standing behind me. Kunagisa was not able to see inside the room, so she just made an odd animal-like yelp, "Uryu?"

Koutari Hinayoshi-san. He used to be covered in hair and mustache like some monster that appears in novels. Even I was unable to retrain my surprise at this situation.

"….. why? Huh? Wait what wait what wait what. Umm….. sorry, I am confused."

"You're the one who said to cut my hair."

Koutari-san said with his low voice. That complete lack of emotion definitely pointed to being him, despite not looking anything remotely like him. He cut all of that scruffy, long hair – no, shaved, and even shaved his mustache. Was that because of what I said?

"What other reason would there be," Koutari-san answered curtly. "Take responsibility for your words."

"….."

Wah…..

I did not mean it that way…

While caught off-guard, I said, "That suits you better. You look awesome." Of course, even if it were not so, I have not thrown away enough of my humanity to be able to say, "Nevermind, you looked better the way you were before. It is a shame you cut it all." Koutari-san did not react at all to my praise, and simply looked away in silence.

I glanced at Suzunashi-san, who was looking at me with a "see what you've done" expression. Indeed, I have no words to return.

"Hahah. Well well, quite a surprise," Neo-san slapped his hands together, and said. "That

Koutari-san had such a handsome face. They say that women transform when they cut their hair, but for that to apply to us men as well. Truly a surprise, this morning. Rightly astonishing. Perhaps if I were to become bald I might turn out to be handsome, too."

"Of course not."

The conversation between the two was the same as always. Except that Neo-san continued this time in a dark tone, "… really, if it were not for the situation at hand, I would be laughing."

"….. the situation at hand?" I repeated Neo-san's words. "What do you mean by the situation at hand. Did something happen?"

"Good intuition, overseas student from the ER Program," Neo-san said. "I was just talking to this beautiful lady about that."

I looked at Suzunashi-san again. She nodded, "that's how it was."

"Inoji. It seems… well I don't know how to put it, but some troublesome stuff happened."

"Troublesome stuff."

What does that mean. *Troublesome stuff* that would cause Neo-san and Koutari-san to walk all the way to the inn this early in the morning meant that this had to do with either Professor Kyouichirou or Utsurigi… no, maybe it was about last night? Maybe someone had seen it. I thought, and placed a hand to my cheek.

"……"

No, I am not talking about when I was **licked** by Kasugai-san.

"Yup," Suzunashi-san nodded. "Remember that incident that caused you and Asano to become friends right after you moved in during February? Like that. …. no, even **worse**."

"….. **even worse**?"

I could not even begin to fathom a situation like that.

I looked back at Neo-san.

Neo-san exhaled deeply, and then stood up from the bed.

"Well, they do say seeing is better than hearing… let's head to the seventh ward," Neo-san walked past me, scratching his head. "Today was the first time I went in there, but… this sort of first. I wonder if this is karma or something."

"Seventh ward… did something happen to–"

I began to say, but Neo-san seemed to have regained some of his earlier flamboyancy, for he

said with an exaggerated expression, “In short.”

“We have very distressing news to relay to you.”

2

That spectacle was just like the worshiping of some divinity.

I had seen this countless times.

I had seen this sort of spectacle countless times. I had seen this sort of spectacle, that causes your nerves to numb and your thoughts to freeze, countless times. Last month and last last month and the month before that, I had seen this. However, even so this rattled me. The spectacle, which caused neither a drop of admiration nor a drop of of excitement, lay sprawled out in the room.

– or should I say was scattered.

This was clearly a work of art designed to be shown to someone.

A work of art designed to be shown.

”– Utsurigi, Gaisuke…..”

Utsurigi’s body was crucified to the white wall.

Like a pariah, was a comparison that I could not make. No matter what, this could not be seen in the same light as that sort of lukewarm thing. There was no meaning to describing this with words. It was just a massacred corpse. It was nothing but a massacred corpse. How, how is one supposed to compare such an absolute thing?

”…..”

Both eyes, those, laughing, and sharp, almost fanged set of eyes, were already gone. In the sockets which ordinarily house them were instead stainless steel scissors. The blades of the scissors, which were half-open, were spread horizontally, in both sockets. They were in almost to the handle, so forget the retinal muscles, the blades were almost certain through to the brain.

Even that was enough to prove a lack of life, but that was not the end.

First, the mouth.

In the haphazardly opened, in the mouth that was haphazardly opened such that it was clear it was not opened to breath life, was a knife that could only be described as brusque. A brusque knife

that made the knife sitting near by the chest look like a toy that was stabbed through . It was deeply thrust like the scissors in the eye sockets, and it pierced through the back of the throat and even into the wall behind. That was the lynchpin of Utsurigi's crucifixion.

And the chest.

As if on receiving heart surgery, the muscles and ribs were cut open. Human insides were visible from **there**. A scene glimpsed through that made people instinctively want to turn away. Made people re-acknowledge that people are clumps of meat and blood. Just flesh bags crammed with raw stuff.

Stomach.

The cut from the heart went to around the belly button. As such, internal organs that were liberated from the cramped flesh bag, the intestines, spilled out from there. Muddled and slimy. The light-black vessels of blood poked out as if they craved attention. The pungent odor reached all the way across the room. At the very least, even children who hate vegetables would not be able to eat meat for a while after seeing this. Would not be able to eat livers. Disgust preceded fear.

Both legs.

They were **snapped and cracked** to the point where no one can discern the original shape. Bones were sticking out here and there and it was unbearable. That was not all the damage, as the same, thick knives as found in the mouth bore through the thighs. Around the center of the thighs. In other words, that was not just slicing muscle, but also crushing through bone. The lynchpin in the mouth, and two more through both legs. As such, Utsurigi's body looked to be floating.

Crucified.

Bloodied Utsurigi Gaisuke.

White hair, and the orange-colored sunglasses at his feet, and then lab coat drenched red **each and everything** signified that, because it was hard to say Utsurigi Gaisuke's body kept any resemblance.

And what made **that** even more bizarre.

That body **lacked both arms**. As if torn off by something, they were missing from the shoulder. That made Utsurigi look even more unbalanced, even more unnatural, and the lab coat sleeves simply hanging limp awakened even more eeriness.

It was preposterous. Truly preposterous.

Before thinking this to be vicious or inhumane, one was left not understanding what the point of this action, what the meaning of this spectacle was. A dismembered body was far more comforting. To destroy, destroy, and then destroy a person's body to this extent, what meaning could there be?

Crucified.

The entire floor of the room was stained red. It did not need explanation that it was Utsurigi's blood. Some parts were already drying, and becoming black from oxidation. It was a terrible spectacle, as if every ounce of blood that had been inside Utsurigi's body had leaked out.

However, more than that floor, everyone's eyes gravitated toward Utsurigi's half-destroyed body and – the wall behind him. On that white backdrop wall. That wall that was already white.

Had **words written in blood**.

Enormous letters, as if the final set of ornamentation to Utsurigi Gaisuke's body, as if the final work to decorating this spectacle, spelled out a sentence in blood.

Of course that was not a message from the dead. Clearly, the suspect who had created this spectacle – yes, it was a message from the suspect.

It was difficult to read here and there, but the meaning could be understood. It was written in English.

You just watch,『DEAD BLUE』!!

"……"

『Shut up and watch, Kunagisa Tomo.』

I.

I looked at Kunagisa. I looked at Kunagisa, standing beside me.

However, however I, froze.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Looked at the sight in front of her eyes.

With her former comrade, the friend she had come here to save, the human being she had just reunited with yesterday, crucified in front of her. With her eyes reflecting Utsurigi Gaisuke, *Green Green Green*, crucified to the wall with both eyes pierced and mouth gouged and chest opened and stomach gashed and legs stabbed and arms ripped off. Reading the message left for her by the suspect.

And laughed.

Kunagisa Tomo was laughing.

Happily. As if she had encountered what she had desired. As if she had just gotten what she wanted. Without any trace of innocence, without any piece of joy, an indescribable smile.

As if spellbound by that spectacle.

As if comforted by that spectacle.

As if enraptured by that spectacle.

It was definitely a Kunagisa Tomo I did not know.

A *Dead Blue* I did not know.

I did not know this thing.

When it was speaking to Professor Kyouichirou.

When it was reuniting with Utsurigi.

This was nothing like that.

I had finally, at this point, gradually begun to comprehend the true meaning behind Utsurigi's words, that he had left to me yesterday before a blade had been shoved through his mouth, what that man who knew of a different era of Kunagisa Tomo.

It would probably be some time later that I truly understood everything. However at this point, a switch had definitely been flicked. A switch, for myself, and for this Kunagisa Tomo, that declared a far too belated beginning, had been flicked on after six years. In the end the end of the beginning was not the beginning of the end, but rather just the end of the beginning. Whether the end begins afterwards, cannot be recognized until the end. That was why.

The Verge and the Bacteria, stood there, as if looking into each others' eyes.